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MYSTERY STORY

THE DRESSMAKER'S DOLL — *Agatha Christie* — 5

DETECTIVE STORIES

ONCE OVER, NOT TOO LIGHTLY — *Thomas Walsh* — 20

JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE HUMAN — *William Fay* — 35

THE BANQUO TRAP — *Lillian de la Torre* — 56

THE HOLLOW DRAGON — *Ellery Queen* — 81

THE LADY, OR THE MURDERER? — *William E. Barrett* — 116

SHORT STORY WORKSHOP

A SCRAP OF PAPER — *James J. Kelly* — 74

CRIME STORIES

THE LIVING BRACELET — *Robert Bloch* — 33

A CASE OF HEREDITY — *Lloyd Biggle, Jr.* — 48

HOW TO DEAL WITH IT — *Richard Snodgrass* — 99

MYSTERY PAPERBACKS OF THE MONTH — 79

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH — *Anthony Boucher* — 80

INDEX TO VOLUME THIRTY-THREE — 130

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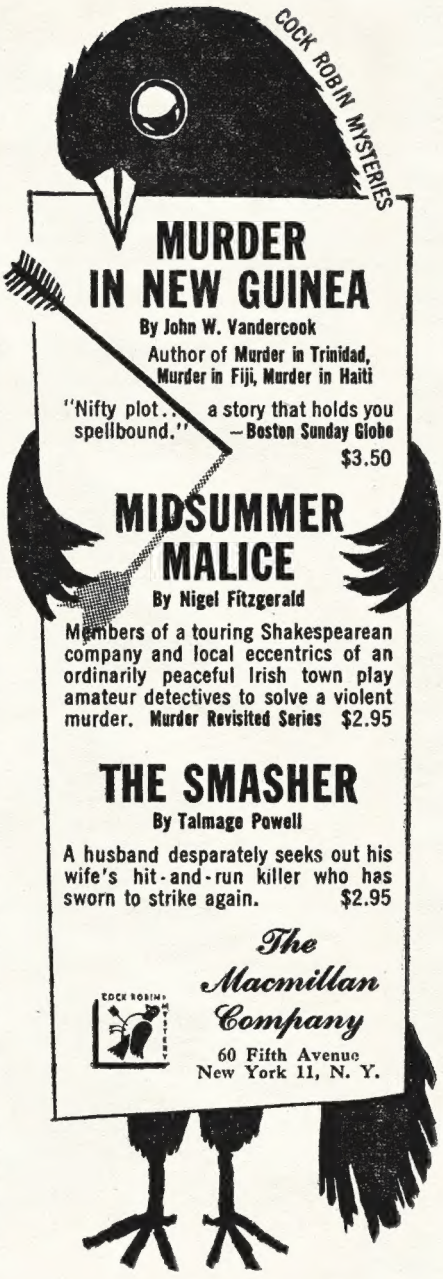

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the newest short story by

AUTHOR: **AGATHA CHRISTIE**

TITLE: ***The Dressmaker's Doll***

TYPE: Mystery Story

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A mess of limp rags, bits of velvet and silk, with a painted face, and origin unknown — but it was (and this was the haunting and horrifying part) a peripatetic creature . . .*

EDITOR'S FILEBOARD

THE DOLL LAY IN THE BIG VELVET-covered chair. There was not much light in the room; the London skies were dark. In the gentle, grayish-green gloom, the sage-green coverings and the curtains and the rugs all blended with each other. The doll blended too. She lay long and limp and sprawled in her green-velvet clothes and her velvet cap and the painted mask of her face. She was not a doll as children understand dolls. She was the Puppet Doll, the whim of Rich Women, the doll who lolls beside the telephone, or among the cushions of the divan. She sprawled there, eternally limp and yet strangely alive. She looked a decadent product of the twentieth century.

Sybil Fox, hurrying in with some patterns and a sketch, looked at the doll with a faint feeling of surprise and bewilderment. She wondered—but whatever she wondered did not get to the front of her mind. Instead, she thought to herself, "Now, what's happened to the pattern of the blue velvet? Wherever have I put it? I'm sure I had it here just now." She went out on the landing and called up to the workroom.

"Elspeth. Elspeth, have you the blue pattern up there? Mrs. Fel-

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lows-Brown will be here any minute now."

She went in again, switching on the lights. Again she glanced at the doll. "Now where on earth—ah, there it is." She picked the pattern up from where it had fallen from her hand. There was the usual creak outside on the landing as the elevator came to a halt and in a minute or two Mrs. Fellows-Brown, accompanied by her Pekinese, came puffing into the room rather like a fussy local train arriving at a wayside station.

"It's going to pour," she said, "simply *pour!*"

She threw off gloves and a fur. Alicia Coombe came in. She didn't always come in nowadays, only when special customers arrived, and Mrs. Fellows-Brown was such a customer.

Elspeth, the forewoman of the workroom, came down with the frock and Sybil pulled it over Mrs. Fellows-Brown's head.

"There," she said. "It really does suit you. It's a lovely color, isn't it."

Alicia Coombe sat back a little in her chair, studying it.

"Yes," she said, "I think it's good. Yes, it's definitely a success."

Mrs. Fellows-Brown turned sideways and looked in the mirror.

"I must say," she said, "your clothes do *do* something to my behind."

"You're much thinner than you were three months ago," Sybil assured her.

"I'm really not," said Mrs. Fellows-Brown, "though I must say I *look* it in this. There's something about the way you cut, it really does minimize my behind. I almost look as though I hadn't got one—I mean only the usual kind that most people have." She sighed and gingerly smoothed the troublesome portion of her anatomy. "It's always been a bit of a trial to me," she said. "Of course, for years I could pull it in, you know, by sticking out my front. Well, I can't do that any longer because I've got a stomach now as well as a behind. And I mean—well, you can't pull it in both ways, can you?"

Alicia Coombe said, "You should see some of my customers!"

Mrs. Fellows-Brown experimented to and fro.

"A stomach is worse than a behind," she said. "It shows more. Or perhaps you think it does, because, I mean, when you're talking to people you're facing them and that's the moment they can't see your behind but they can notice your stomach. Anyway, I've made it a rule to pull in my stomach and let my behind look after itself." She craned her neck round still farther, then said suddenly, "Oh, that doll of yours! She gives me the creeps. How long have you had her?"

Sybil glanced uncertainly at Alicia Coombe who looked puzzled but vaguely distressed.

"I don't know exactly . . . some

time I think—I never *can* remember things. It's awful nowadays—I simply *cannot* remember. Sybil, how long have we had her?"

Sybil said shortly, "I don't know."

"Well," said Mrs. Fellows-Brown, "she gives *me* the creeps. Uncanny! She looks, you know, as though she was watching us all, and perhaps laughing in that velvet sleeve of hers. I'd get rid of her if I were you." She gave a little shiver. Then she plunged once more into dressmaking details. Should she or should she not have the sleeves an inch shorter? And what about the length? When all these important points were settled satisfactorily, Mrs. Fellows-Brown resumed her own garments and prepared to leave. As she passed the doll, she turned her head again.

"No," she said, "I *don't* like that doll. She looks too much as though she *belonged* here. It isn't healthy."

"Now what did she mean by that?" demanded Sybil, as Mrs. Fellows-Brown departed down the stairs.

Before Alicia Coombe could answer, Mrs. Fellows-Brown returned, poking her head round the door.

"Good gracious, I forgot all about Fou-Ling. Where are you, ducksie? Well I never!"

She stared and the other two women stared too. The Pekinese was sitting by the green-velvet chair, staring up at the limp doll sprawled on it. There was no expression, either of pleasure or resentment, on his small popeyed face. He was merely looking.

"Come along, mum's darling," said Mrs. Fellows-Brown.

Mum's darling paid no attention whatever.

"He gets more disobedient every day," said Mrs. Fellows-Brown, with the air of one cataloguing a virtue. "Come *on,* Fou-Ling. Din-dins. Luffly liver."

Fou-Ling turned his head about an inch and a half toward his mistress, then with disdain resumed his appraisal of the doll.

"She certainly made an impression on him," said Mrs. Fellows-Brown. "I don't think he's ever noticed her before. *I* haven't either. Was she here last time I came?"

The two other women looked at each other. Sybil now had a frown on her face, and Alicia Coombe said, wrinkling up her forehead, "I told you—I simply can't remember anything nowadays. How long *have* we had her, Sybil?"

"Where did she come from?" demanded Mrs. Fellows-Brown. "Did you buy her?"

"Oh, no." Somehow Alicia Coombe was shocked at the idea. "Oh *no.* I suppose—I suppose someone gave her to me." She shook her head. "Maddening!" she exclaimed. "Absolutely maddening, when everything goes out of your head the very moment after it's happened."

"Now don't be stupid, Fou-Ling," said Mrs. Fellows-Brown sharply,

"Come on. I'll have to pick you up."

She picked him up. Fou-Ling uttered a short bark of agonized protest. They went out of the room with Fou-Ling's popeyed face turned over his fluffy shoulder, still staring with enormous attention at the doll on the chair . . .

"That there doll," said Mrs. Groves, "fair gives me the creeps, it does."

Mrs. Groves was the cleaner. She had just finished a crablike progress backward along the floor. Now she was standing up and working slowly round the room with a duster.

"Funny thing," said Mrs. Groves, "never noticed it really until yesterday. And then it hit me all of a sudden, as you might say."

"You don't like it?" asked Sybil.

"I tell you, Mrs. Fox, it gives me the creeps," said the cleaning woman. "It ain't natural, if you know what I mean. All those long hanging legs and the way she's slouched down there and the cunning look she has in her eye. It doesn't look healthy, that's what I say."

"You've never said anything about her before," said Sybil.

"I tell you, I never noticed her—not till this morning . . . Of course I know she's been here some time but—" She stopped and a puzzled expression flitted across her face. "Sort of thing you might dream of at night," she said, and gathering up various cleaning implements she departed from the fitting room and walked across the landing to the room on the other side.

Sybil stared at the relaxed doll. An expression of bewilderment was growing on her face. Alicia Coombe entered and Sybil turned sharply.

"Miss Coombe, how long *have* you had this creature?"

"What, the doll? My dear, you know I can't remember things. Yesterday—why, it's too silly! I was going out to that lecture and I hadn't gone halfway down the street when I suddenly found I couldn't remember where I was going. I thought and I thought. Finally I told myself it *must* be Fortnums. I knew there was something I wanted to get at Fortnums. Well, you won't believe me, it wasn't till I actually got home and was having some tea that I remembered about the lecture. Of course, I've always heard that people go gaga as they get on in life, but it's happening to me much too fast. I've forgotten now where I've put my handbag—and my spectacles too. Where did I put those spectacles? I had them just now—I was reading something in the *Times*."

"The spectacles are on the mantelpiece here," said Sybil, handing them to her. "How did you get the doll? Who gave her to you?"

"That's a blank, too," said Alicia Coombe. "*Somebody* gave her to me or sent her to me, I suppose . . . However she does seem to match

the room very well, doesn't she?"

"Rather too well, I think," said Sybil. "Funny thing is, *I* can't remember when I first noticed her here."

"Now don't you get the same way as I am," Alicia Coombe admonished her. "After all, you're young still."

"But really, Miss Coombe, I don't remember. I mean, I looked at her yesterday and thought there was something—well, Mrs. Grove is quite right—something creepy about her. And then I thought I'd already thought so, and then I tried to remember when I first thought so and—well, I just couldn't remember anything! In a way, it was as if I'd never seen her before—only it didn't feel like that. It felt as though she'd been here a long time but I'd only just noticed her."

"Perhaps she flew in through the window one day on a broomstick," said Alicia Coombe. "Anyway, she belongs here now all right." She looked round. "You could hardly imagine the room without her, could you?"

"No," said Sybil, with a slight shiver, "but I rather wish I could."

"Could what?"

"Imagine the room without her."

"Are we all going barmy about this doll?" demanded Alicia Coombe impatiently. "What's wrong with the poor thing? Looks like a decayed cabbage to me, but perhaps," she added, "that's because I haven't got my spectacles on." She put them on her nose and looked firmly at the doll. "Yes," she said, "I see what you mean. She *is* a little creepy . . . Sad-looking but —well, sly and rather determined, too."

"Funny," said Sybil, "Mrs. Fellows-Brown taking such a violent dislike to her."

"She's one who never minds speaking her mind," said Alicia Coombe.

"But it's odd," persisted Sybil, "that this doll should make such an impression on her."

"Well, people do take dislikes very suddenly sometimes."

"Perhaps," said Sybil, with a little laugh, "that doll never *was* here until yesterday . . . Perhaps she just —flew in through the window as you say and settled herself here."

"No," said Alicia Coombe, "I'm sure she's been here some time. Perhaps she only became visible yesterday."

"That's what I feel, too," said Sybil, "that she's been here some time . . . but all the same I *don't* remember really seeing her till yesterday."

"Now, dear," said Alicia Coombe briskly, "do stop it. You're making me feel quite peculiar with shivers running up and down my spine. You're not going to work up a great deal of supernatural hoo-hah about that creature, are you?" She picked up the doll, shook it out, rearranged its shoulders, and sat it down again on another chair. Im-

mediately the doll flopped slightly and relaxed.

"It's not a bit lifelike," said Alicia Coombe, staring at the doll. "And yet, in a funny way, she does seem alive, doesn't she?"

"Oo, it did give me a turn," said Mrs. Groves, as she went round the showroom, dusting. "Such a turn as I hardly like to go into the fitting room any more."

"What's given you a turn?" demanded Miss Coombe, who was sitting at a writing table in the corner, busy with various accounts. "This woman," she added more for her own benefit than that of Mrs. Groves, "thinks she can have two evening dresses, three cocktail dresses, and a suit every year without ever paying me a penny for them! Really, some people!"

"It's that doll," said Mrs. Groves.

"What, our doll again?"

"Yes, sitting up there at the desk, like a human. Oo, it didn't half give me a turn!"

"What are you talking about?"

Alicia Coombe got up, strode across the room, across the little landing outside, and into the room opposite—the fitting room. There was a small Sheraton desk in one corner of it, and there, sitting in a chair drawn up to it, her long floppy arms on the desk, sat the doll.

"Somebody seems to have been having fun," said Alicia Coombe. "Fancy sitting her up like that. Really, she looks quite natural."

Sybil Fox came down the stairs at this moment carrying a dress that was to be tried on that morning.

"Come here, Sybil. Look at our doll sitting at my private desk and writing letters now."

The two women looked.

"Really," said Alicia Coombe, "it's too ridiculous! I wonder who propped her up there. Did you?"

"No, I didn't," said Sybil. "It must have been one of the girls from upstairs."

"A silly sort of joke, really," said Alicia Coombe. She picked up the doll from the desk and threw her back on the sofa.

Sybil laid the dress over a chair carefully, then she went out and up the stairs to the workroom.

"You know the doll," she said, "the velvet doll in Miss Coombe's room downstairs—in the fitting room?"

The forewoman and three of the girls looked up.

"Yes, miss, of course we know."

"Who sat her up at the desk this morning for a joke?"

The three girls looked at her, then Elspeth, the forewoman, said, "Sat her up at the desk? *I* didn't."

"Nor did I," said one of the girls. "Did you, Marlene?"

Marlene shook her head.

"This your bit of fun, Elspeth?"

"No, indeed," said Elspeth, a stern woman who looked as though her mouth should always be full of pins. "I've more to do than going

about playing with dolls and sitting them up at desks."

"Look here," said Sybil, and to her surprise her voice shook slightly. "It was—it was quite a good joke, only I'd just like to know who did it."

The three girls bristled.

"We've told you, Mrs. Fox. None of us did it, did we, Marlene?"

"I didn't," said Marlene, "and if Nellie and Margaret say they didn't, well then none of us did."

"You've heard what *I* had to say," said Elspeth. "What's this all about anyway, Mrs. Fox?"

Sybil said slowly, "It just seemed so odd."

"Perhaps it was Mrs. Groves?" said Elspeth.

Sybil shook her head. "It wouldn't be Mrs. Groves. It gave *her* quite a turn."

"I'll come down and see for myself," said Elspeth.

"She's not there now," said Sybil. "Miss Coombe took her away from the desk and threw her back on the sofa. Well—" she paused, "what I mean is, someone must have stuck her up there in the chair at the writing desk—thinking it was funny, I suppose. And—and I don't see why they won't say so."

"I've told you twice, Mrs. Fox," said Margaret. "I don't see why you should go on accusing us of telling lies. None of us would do a silly thing like that."

"I'm sorry," said Sybil, "I didn't mean to upset you. But—but who else could possibly have done it?"

"Perhaps she got up and walked there herself," said Marlene, and giggled.

For some reason Sybil didn't like the suggestion.

"Oh, it's all a lot of nonsense, anyway," she said, and went down the stairs again.

Alicia Coombe was humming quite cheerfully. She looked round the room.

"I've lost my spectacles again," she said, "but it doesn't really matter. I don't want to see anything this moment. The trouble is, of course, when you're as blind as I am, that when you have lost your spectacles, unless you've got another pair to put on and find them with, well then you can't find them because you can't see to find them."

"I'll look round for you," said Sybil. "You had them just now."

"I went into the other room when you went upstairs. I expect I took them back in there."

She went across to the other room.

"It's such a bother," said Alicia Coombe. "I want to get on with these accounts. How can I if I haven't my spectacles?"

"I'll go up and get your second pair from the bedroom," said Sybil.

"I haven't got a second pair at present," said Alicia Coombe.

"Why, what's happened to them?"

"Well, I think I left them yesterday when I was out at lunch. I've

rung up there, and I've rung up the two shops I went into, too."

"Oh, dear," said Sybil, "you'll have to get *three* pairs, I suppose."

"If I had three pairs of spectacles," said Alicia Coombe, "I should spend my whole life looking for one or the other of them. I really think it's best to have only *one*. Then you've *got* to look till you find it."

"Well, they must be somewhere," said Sybil. "You haven't been out of these two rooms. They're certainly not here, so you must have laid them down in the fitting room."

She went back, walking round, looking quite closely. Finally, as a last idea, she took up the doll from the sofa.

"I've got them," she called.

"Oh, where were they, Sybil?"

"Under our precious doll. I suppose you must have thrown them down when you put her back on the sofa."

"I didn't. I'm sure I didn't."

"Oh," said Sybil with exasperation. "Then I suppose the doll took them and was hiding them from you!"

"Really, you know," said Alicia, looking thoughtfully at the doll, "I wouldn't put it past her. She looks very intelligent, don't you think, Sybil?"

"I don't think I like her face," said Sybil. "She looks as though she knew something that we didn't."

"You don't think she looks sort of sad and sweet?" said Alicia Coombe, pleadingly, but without conviction.

"I don't think she's in the least sweet," said Sybil.

"No . . . perhaps you're right. . . . Oh, well, let's get on with things. Lady Lee will be here in another ten minutes. I just want to get these invoices done and posted."

"Mrs. Fox. Mrs. Fox."

"Yes, Margaret?" said Sybil. "What is it?"

Sybil was busy leaning over a table, cutting a piece of satin material.

"Oh, Mrs. Fox, it's that doll again. I took down the brown dress like you said, and there's that doll sitting up at the desk again. And it wasn't me—it wasn't any of us. Please, Mrs. Fox, we really wouldn't do such a thing."

Sybil's scissors slid a little.

"There," she said angrily, "look what you've made me do. Oh, well, it'll be all right, I suppose. Now, what's this about the doll?"

"She's sitting at the desk again."

Sybil went down and walked into the fitting room. The doll was sitting at the desk exactly as she had sat there before.

"You're very determined, aren't you?" said Sybil, speaking to the doll.

She picked her up unceremoniously and put her back on the sofa.

"That's your place, my girl," she said. "You stay there."

She walked across to the other room.

"Miss Coombe."

"Yes, Sybil?"

"Somebody *is* having a game with us, you know. That doll was sitting at the desk again."

"Who do you think it is?"

"It must be one of those three upstairs," said Sybil. "Thinks it's funny, I suppose. Of course they all swear to high heaven it wasn't them."

"Who do you think it is—Margaret?"

"No, I don't think it's Margaret. She looked quite queer when she came in and told me. I expect it's that giggling Marlene."

"Anyway, it's a very silly thing to do."

"Of course it is—idiotic," said Sybil. "However," she added grimly, "I'm going to put a stop to it."

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll see," said Sybil.

That night when she left, she locked the fitting-room door from the outside.

"I'm locking this door," she said, "and I'm taking the key with me."

"Oh, I see," said Alicia Coombe, with a faint air of amusement. "You're beginning to think it's me, are you? You think I'm so absent-minded that I go in there and think I'll write at the desk, but instead I pick the doll up and put her there to write for me. Is that the idea? And then I forget all about it?"

"Well, it's a possibility," Sybil admitted. "Anyway, I'm going to be quite sure that no silly practical joke is played tonight."

The following morning, her lips set grimly, the first thing Sybil did on arrival was to unlock the door of the fitting room and march in. Mrs. Groves, with an aggrieved expression and mop and duster in hand, had been waiting on the landing.

"*Now* we'll see!" said Sybil.

Then she drew back with a slight gasp.

The doll was sitting at the desk.

"Coo!" said Mrs. Groves behind her. "It's uncanny! That's what it is. Oh, there, Mrs. Fox, you look quite pale, as though you've come over queer. You need a little drop of something. Has Miss Coombe got a drop upstairs, do you know?"

"I'm quite all right," said Sybil.

She walked over to the doll, lifted her carefully, and crossed the room with her.

"Somebody's been playing a trick on you again," said Mrs. Groves.

"I don't see how they could have played a trick on me this time," said Sybil slowly. "I locked that door last night. You know yourself that no one could get in."

"Somebody's got another key, maybe," said Mrs. Groves, helpfully.

"I don't think so," said Sybil. "We've never bothered to lock this door before. It's one of those old-fashioned keys and there's only one of them."

"Perhaps the other key fits it—the one to the door opposite."

In due course they tried all the keys in the shop, but none fitted the door of the fitting room.

"It *is* odd, Miss Coombe," said Sybil later, as they were having lunch together.

Alicia Coombe was looking rather pleased.

"My dear," she said. "I think it's simply extraordinary. I think we ought to write to the psychical research people about it. You know, they might send an investigator—a medium or someone—to see if there's anything peculiar about the room."

"You don't seem to mind at all," said Sybil.

"Well, I rather enjoy it in a way," said Alicia Coombe. "I mean, at my age, it's rather fun when things happen! All the same—no," she added thoughtfully, "I don't think I do quite like it. I mean, that doll's getting rather above herself, isn't she?"

On that evening Sybil and Alicia Coombe locked the door once more on the outside.

"I still think," said Sybil, "that somebody might be playing a practical joke, though really, I don't see why . . ."

"Do you think she'll be at the desk again tomorrow morning?" demanded Alicia.

"Yes," said Sybil, "I do."

But they were wrong. The doll was not at the desk. Instead, she was on the window sill, looking out into the street. And again there was an extraordinary naturalness about her position.

"It's all frightfully silly, isn't it?" said Alicia Coombe, as they were snatching a quick cup of tea that afternoon. By common consent they were not having it in the fitting room, as they usually did, but in Alicia Coombe's own room opposite.

"Silly in what way?"

"Well, I mean, there's nothing you can get hold of. Just a doll that's always in a different place."

As day followed day it seemed a more and more apt observation. It was not only at night that the doll now moved. At any moment when they came into the fitting room, after they had been absent even a few minutes, they might find the doll in a different place. They could have left her on the sofa and find her on a chair. Then she'd be on a different chair. Sometimes she'd be in the window seat, sometimes at the desk again.

"She just moves about as she likes," said Alicia Coombe. "And I think, Sybil, I *think* it's amusing her."

The two women stood looking down at the inert sprawling figure in its limp, soft velvet, with its painted silk face.

"Some old bits of velvet and silk and a lick of paint, that's all it is," said Alicia Coombe. Her voice was strained. "I suppose, you know, we could—er—we could dispose of her."

"What do you mean, dispose of her?" asked Sybil. Her voice sounded almost shocked.

"Well," said Alicia Coombe, "we could put her in the fire, if there was a fire. Burn her, I mean, like a witch . . . Or of course," she added matter-of-factly, "we could just put her in the dustbin."

"I don't think that would do," said Sybil. "Somebody would probably take her out of the dustbin and bring her back to us."

"Or we could send her somewhere," said Alicia Coombe. "You know, to one of those societies who are always writing and asking for something—for a sale or a bazaar. I think that's the best idea."

"I don't know . . ." said Sybil. "I'd be almost afraid to do that."

"Afraid?"

"Well, I think she'd come back," said Sybil.

"You mean, she'd come back *here?*"

"Yes."

"Like a homing pigeon?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"I suppose we're not going off our heads, are we?" said Alicia Coombe. "Perhaps I've really gone gaga and perhaps you're just humoring me, is that it?"

"No," said Sybil. "But I've got a nasty frightened feeling—a horrid feeling that she's too strong for us."

"What? That mess of rags?"

"Yes, that horrible limp mess of rags. Because, you see, she's so determined."

"Determined?"

"To have her own way? You mean, this is *her* room now!"

"Yes," said Alicia Coombe, looking round, "it is, isn't it? Of course, it always was, when you come to think of it—the colors and everything . . . I thought she fitted in here, but it's the room that fits her. I must say," added the dressmaker, with a touch of briskness in her voice, "it's rather absurd when a doll comes and takes possession of things like this. You know, Mrs. Groves won't come in here any longer and clean."

"Does she say she's frightened of the doll?"

"No. She just makes excuses of some kind or other." Then Alicia added with a hint of panic, "What are we going to do, Sybil? It's getting me down, you know. I haven't been able to design anything for weeks."

"I can't keep my mind on cutting out properly," Sybil confessed. "I make all sorts of silly mistakes. Perhaps," she said uncertainly, "your idea of writing to the psychical research people might do some good."

"Just make us look like a couple of fools," said Alicia Coombe. "I didn't seriously mean it. No, I suppose we'll just have to go on until—"

"Until what?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Alicia, and she laughed uncertainly.

On the following day Sybil, when

she arrived, found the door of the fitting room locked.

"Miss Coombe, have you got the key? Did you lock this last night?"

"Yes," said Alicia Coombe, "I locked it and it's going to stay locked."

"What do you mean?"

"I just mean I've given up the room. The doll can have it. We don't need two rooms. We can fit in here."

"But it's your own private sitting room."

"Well, I don't want it any more. I've got a very nice bedroom. I can make a bed-sitting room out of that, can't I?"

"Do you mean you're really not going into that fitting room ever again?" said Sybil incredulously.

"That's exactly what I mean."

"But—what about cleaning? It'll get in a terrible state."

"Let it!" said Alicia Coombe. "If this place is suffering from some kind of possession by a doll, all right—let her keep possession. And clean the room herself." And she added, "She hates us, you know."

"What do you mean?" said Sybil "The doll *hates* us?"

"Yes," said Alicia. "Didn't you know? You must have known. You must have seen it when you looked at her."

"Yes," said Sybil thoughtfully, "I suppose I did. I suppose I felt like that all along—that she hated us and wanted to get us out of there."

"She's a malicious little thing," said Alicia Coombe. "Anyway, she ought to be satisfied now."

Things went on rather more peacefully after that. Alicia Coombe announced to her staff that she was giving up the use of the fitting room for the present—it made too many rooms to dust and clean, she explained.

But it hardly helped her to overhear one of the work girls saying to another on the evening of the same day, "She really is batty, Miss Coombe is now. I always thought she was a bit queer—the way she lost things and forgot things. But it's really beyond anything now, isn't it? She's got a sort of thing about that doll downstairs."

"Ooo, you don't think she'll go really bats, do you?" said the other girl. "That she might knife us or something?"

They passed, chattering, and Alicia sat up indignantly in her chair. Going bats indeed! Then she added ruefully, to herself, "I suppose, if it wasn't for Sybil, I should think myself that I was going bats. But with me and Sybil and Mrs. Groves too, well, it does look as though there was *something* in it. But what I don't see is, how is it going to end?"

Three weeks later, Sybil said to Alicia Coombe, "We've got to go into that room *sometime*."

"Why?"

"Well, I mean, it must be in a

filthy state. Moths will be getting into things, and all that. We ought just to dust and sweep it and then lock it up again."

"I'd much rather keep it shut up and not go back in there," said Alicia Coombe.

Sybil said, "Really, you know, you're even more superstitious than I am."

"I suppose I am," said Alicia Coombe. "I was much more ready to believe in all this than you were, but to begin with, you know—I—well, I found it exciting in an odd sort of way. I don't know. I'm just scared, and I'd rather not go into that room again."

"Well, I want to," said Sybil, "and I'm going to."

"You know what's the matter with you?" said Alicia Coombe. "You're simply curious, that's all."

"All right, then I'm curious. I want to see what the doll's done."

"I still think it's much better to leave her alone," said Alicia. "Now we've got out of that room, she's satisfied. You'd better leave her satisfied." She gave an exasperated sigh. "What nonsense we are talking!"

"Yes, I know we're talking nonsense, but if you tell me of any way of *not* talking nonsense—come on, now, give me that key."

"All right, all right."

"I believe you're afraid I'll let her out or something. I should think she was the kind that could pass through doors or windows."

Sybil unlocked the door and went in.

"How terribly odd," she said.

"What's odd?" said Alicia Coombe, peering over her shoulder.

"The room hardly seems dusty at all, does it? You'd think, after being shut up all this time—"

"Yes, it is odd."

"There she is," said Sybil.

The doll was on the sofa. She was not lying in her usual limp position. She was sitting upright, a cushion behind her back. She had the air of the mistress of the house, waiting to receive people.

"Well," said Alicia Coombe, "she seems at home all right, doesn't she? I almost feel I ought to apologize for coming in."

"Let's go," said Sybil.

She backed out, pulled the door to, and locked it again.

The two women gazed at each other.

"I wish I knew," said Alicia Coombe, "why it scares us so much . . ."

"My goodness, who wouldn't be scared?"

"Well, I mean, what *happens,* after all? It's nothing really—just a kind of puppet that gets moved around the room. I expect it isn't the puppet itself—it's a poltergeist."

"Now that *is* a good idea."

"Yes, but I don't really believe it. I think it's—it's that doll."

"Are you *sure* you don't know where she really came from?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said

Alicia. "And the more I think of it the more I'm perfectly certain that I didn't buy her, and that nobody gave her to me. I think she—well, she just came."

"Do you think she'll—ever go?"

"Really," said Alicia, "I don't see why she should . . . She's got all she wants."

But it seemed that the doll had not got all she wanted. The next day, when Sybil went into the showroom, she drew in her breath with a sudden gasp. Then she called up the stairs.

"Miss Coombe, Miss Coombe, come down here."

"What's the matter?"

Alicia Coombe, who had got up late, came down the stairs, hobbling a little precariously for she had rheumatism in her right knee.

"What is the matter with you, Sybil?"

"Look. Look what's happened now."

They stood in the doorway of the showroom. Sitting on a sofa, sprawled easily over the arm of it, was the doll.

"She's got out," said Sybil. *"She's got out of that room!* She wants this room as well."

Alicia Coombe sat down by the door. "In the end," she said, "I suppose she'll want the whole shop."

"She might," said Sybil.

"You nasty, sly, malicious brute." said Alicia, addressing the doll. "What do you want to come and pester us so? We don't want you."

It seemed to her, and to Sybil too, that the doll moved very slightly. It was as though its limbs relaxed still further. A long limp arm was lying on the arm of the sofa and the half-hidden face looked as if it were peering from under the arm. And it was a sly, malicious look.

"Horrible creature," said Alicia. "I can't bear it! I can't bear it any longer."

Suddenly, taking Sybil completely by surprise, she dashed across the room, picked up the doll, ran to the window, opened it, and flung the doll out into the street. There was a gasp and a half cry of fear from Sybil.

"Oh, Alicia, you shouldn't have done that! I'm sure you shouldn't have done that!"

"I had to do something," said Alicia Coombe. "I just couldn't stand it any more."

Sybil joined her at the window. Down below on the pavement the doll lay, loose-limbed, face down.

"You've *killed* her," said Sybil.

"Don't be absurd . . . How can I kill something that's made of velvet and silk, bits and pieces. It's not real."

"It's horribly real," said Sybil.

Alicia caught her breath.

"Good heavens. That child—"

A small ragged girl was standing over the doll on the pavement. She looked up and down the street—a street that was not unduly crowded at this time of the morning though

there was some automobile traffic; then, as though satisfied, the child bent, picked up the doll, and ran across the street.

"Stop, stop!" called Alicia.

She turned to Sybil.

"That child mustn't take the doll. She *mustn't!* That doll is dangerous—it's evil. We've got to stop her."

It was not they who stopped her. It was the traffic. At that moment three taxis came down one way and two tradesmen's vans in the other direction. The child was marooned on an island in the middle of the road. Sybil rushed down the stairs, Alicia Coombe following her. Dodging between a tradesman's van and a private car, Sybil, with Alicia Coombe directly behind her, arrived on the island before the child could get through the traffic on the opposite side.

"You can't take that doll," said Alicia Coombe. "Give her back to me."

The child looked at her. She was a skinny little girl about eight years old, with a slight squint. Her face was defiant.

"Why should I give 'er to you?" she said. "Pitched her out of the window, you did—I saw you. If you pushed her out of the window you don't want her, so now she's mine."

"I'll buy you another doll," said Alicia frantically. "We'll go to a toy shop—anywhere you like—and I'll buy you the best doll we can find. But give me back this one."

"Shan't," said the child.

Her arms went protectingly round the velvet doll.

"You *must* give her back," said Sybil. "She isn't yours."

She stretched out to take the doll from the child and at that moment the child stamped her foot, turned, and screamed at them.

"Shan't! Shan't! Shan't! She's my very own. I love her. *You* don't love her. You hate her. If you didn't hate her you wouldn't of pushed her out of the window. I love her, I tell you, and that's what she wants. She *wants* to be loved."

And then like an eel, sliding through the vehicles, the child ran across the street, down an alleyway, and out of sight before the two older women could decide to dodge the cars and follow.

"She's gone," said Alicia.

"She said the doll wanted to be loved," said Sybil.

"Perhaps," said Alicia, "perhaps that's what she wanted all along . . . to be loved . . ."

In the middle of the London traffic the two frightened women stared at each other.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**THOMAS WALSH**
TITLE:	***Once Over, Not Too Lightly***
TYPE:	Cop Story
DETECTIVE:	Kilbane
LOCALE:	A city in the United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Payroll holdups, traffic violations, arson, homicide, even mad dogs — all in the day's work to a detective first-class; but what really happened — well!*

IT WAS NO MORE THAN A FEW MINutes past ten, on a slow and rainy November night, when Kilbane happened to meet her in the street corridor at headquarters. Just as she came out of the press room on the mezzanine landing and tip-tapped down marble steps toward the lower hall Kilbane himself, pushing through the frosted glass doors of the detective bureau, paused by a convenient window to light a cigarette and glance out at the melancholy drizzle slanting down past the street lamps in City Hall Square.

That was what allowed Miss Pulitzer to catch up with him. She came on fast, in her accustomed great hurry; at the front entrance, which they reached almost together, Kilbane looked sideways at her, then flicked a forefinger at his hat-brim in a negligent gesture of salutation.

She glanced up, too. "Kilbane," she said, with an offhandedly casual, man-to-man greeting that matched his own perhaps overdone disinterest. At the moment, a slim girl with black hair and dark eyes, dressed in a gray tailored suit and a plain little round hat like a boy's, she was nothing important to Kilbane regardless of how he chose to look at it.

He knew that she had covered the police news for the *Morning*

© *1943 by Thomas Walsh; originally titled "A Name for Baby"*

Tribune ever since Jack Garrity left for the Army, and he had heard somewhere or other that up in the press room, with exceptionally little friendliness, the boys had begun to refer to her as Miss Pulitzer, Scoop, or Byline. That part, of course, was no concern of Kilbane's.

He opened the right-hand door for her by levering his arm against it, let her through, and went out after her. "It's raining," he said, unnecessarily, on the top step.

Miss Pulitzer nodded. Countless tiny drops sprayed up at them on a moody billow of wind; when she narrowed her eyes against them, peering down at a deserted taxi stand near the corner, he turned up his coat collar and mentioned his car and the possibility of a lift simply because there seemed to be nothing else for him to do.

Miss Pulitzer did not jump at it; but after a moment, with an air of not asking for any favors, she admitted that she wanted to stop in at the *Tribune* office. If that was on his way—

Kilbane brought her down to the car and helped her in. He said, "I'll make a stop first, on Eagle Street. A couple of minutes. Okay?"

"Okay with me," Miss Pulitzer told him, dropping the hat into her lap and fluffing out the black hair carelessly. "Business, Kilbane?"

"I guess," Kilbane said. On that November night S. Pasquariella, who was being guarded against certain unpleasant possibilities by Kilbane on the night shift and Charley Harris on the day, was no topic for conversation with anyone from the press room. Kilbane sheered away from him at once. How was the reporting? he wanted to know. Quiet, eh?

"Deadly," Miss Pulitzer said. She gave him a level glance, as if she didn't want him to think anything he shouldn't think. "I'm not thrilled to death, you know. I've done it before."

Kilbane started the car. On the far side of the plaza, where they turned into Eagle Street, he offered the opinion that there was a swell bunch of fellows in the press room. Personally he liked them.

"Oh, fine," Miss Pulitzer said. But she had her head back against the seat and was smiling up scornfully at nothing. "We still exchange good mornings. Perhaps I'm not quite – meek enough, Kilbane. I don't ask advice and when it's given I don't follow it. That's bad. And then, of course, I don't intend to be a police reporter all my life. There you have the really unforgivable thing."

Kilbane, puzzled by what seemed to be a slight lack of continuity, stopped for a traffic light. "Like the town, maybe?"

"It's all right. It's any American town," Miss Pulitzer said. She blew an impatient stream of smoke against the windshield, then pursed her lips carefully. "I'll stick here six months," she said. "I might possi-

bly need that. It—well, gives you prestige or something to say you've worked on the *Tribune*. I don't know why it should, but it does. Then—"

Kilbane cocked his nearer eyebrow at her. "Big stuff," he said. "New York?"

"Why not?" Miss Pulitzer said. She was very cool about it. "That's why I'm not liked, you know. I'm conceited, you understand. I know what I want and I mean to get it. And that's one of the things you mustn't let people see, of course. Never. You've found that out," she said. "You know that's true, don't you, Kilbane?"

"Once in a while I've got a hint of it," Kilbane said, deciding thoughtfully that here was a funny kind of girl. At the next corner he slowed long enough to see that the barber shop of S. Pasquariella had been closed for the night; then, a block down, he pulled into the curb before a two-story-row house with a scrubbed white flagstone in front of it.

Miss Pulitzer sat in the car while he got out and rang the doorbell. He was admitted presently by a little girl with long black hair and enormous black eyes, who told him that Poppa had gone out but that Momma was upstairs. Momma was sick.

"That's too bad," Kilbane said, patting her head. "You're Angelica Therese. Your poppa told me all about you. Know who I am?"

"No," Angelica Therese said, incuriously. She was about eight years old. Behind her in the kitchen doorway a smaller-scale model began to emit wailing sobs without taking her eyes from Kilbane. Angelica Therese looked around at her unemotionally.

"She always cries," Angelica Therese said. "She's Christina Marie. She's only six, mister. I think she's crazy. I can tell you what my momma's got — 'pendecitis. Poppa said so before he went for the doctor. It hurts her bad—awful bad. She—" Noise came from the second floor, and Angelica Therese looked up there with some interest. "You hear her now?"

"Yes," Kilbane said. It seemed to him that he'd have heard her over at headquarters. "Your poppa put an icebag on her before he left?"

"A what?" Angelica Therese said.

Kilbane dropped his hat on the hall table. She should get some ice cubes out of the refrigerator and bring them upstairs as fast as she could. And she mustn't cry. That would only make Momma feel a lot worse.

"All right," Angelica Therese said. "I won't cry."

She didn't. She was perfectly willing to be helpful. But when she went upstairs with the bowl of ice Kilbane erupted violently before her in the bedroom doorway. Did she know what was happening up here? Kilbane demanded in a shrill

voice. Did she have any idea—he stopped, added something in a low whisper, glared helplessly at her and slammed the door.

Three or four minutes later S. Pasquariella and the doctor broke in from the street and ran upstairs. It was all over by then. The baby, S. Pasquariella's first boy, weighed eight pounds and seven ounces, and Kilbane hadn't done a bad job for a detective first-class lacking any kind of previous experience.

The doctor complimented him highly; S. Pasquariella, liquid-eyed, crushed his hand in a grip of steel. But Kilbane got out of there as fast as he could, his coat slung over his arm, his face glistening with sweat. Miss Pulitzer, who had a nose for news, was in the hall by that time talking to Angelica Therese. Kilbane looked at her; after a moment he remembered who she was.

"Come on," he said, going by her blindly into the rain. He did not pick up his hat; he did not put on his coat. And on the way to the *Tribune* office, unobservant of everything, he did not notice that Miss Pulitzer kept on staring at him with bright and interested eyes.

Next morning he read all about it on the back page of the *Tribune,* where the city news usually appeared. It was a two-column spread, signed by one Janet S. Harrington, and the heading was cute and explicit: *Doctor Late, Baby Early; Detective Waylays Stork.*

Kilbane chanced on those words after a late breakfast of ham and eggs, while he was sitting with his feet propped up on the table and a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. For a moment he did not move. Then he sat up slowly, spilling half a cup of coffee into his lap, and reading over the story itself as if it were—as if it had to be—some kind of horrible mistake.

It wasn't, of course. In the first paragraph Miss Pulitzer had done him off brown. There it was narrated that Detective Joseph J. Kilbane, at present attached to the headquarters squad, owned modestly to the principle that the finest was always prepared. Payroll bandits or traffic tickets, mad dogs, homicide or arson—Detective Kilbane took all those things in stride. Babies, too. What—and here Detective Kilbane was quoted directly—what was so exceptional about babies? A good police officer could turn his hand to a lot of things. Twins or triplets might have been considered extraordinary; but a single baby, even one of eight pounds and seven ounces—

"Nothing to it," Detective Kilbane was reported to have said. "Wouldn't any of the boys have done the same?"

There was more, much more. Further down he was described as the "rugged-looking, Fred MacMurray type," and after that it was asserted that he had borne himself throughout the ordeal with the most

incomparable *sang-froid*. Some people might have thought it a fairly amusing story on a night when nothing very much had happened; but Kilbane, who did not agree with their opinion for several grimly personal reasons, walked into headquarters at four that afternoon prepared for anything.

In that he was wise. When he passed the desk, Sergeant Mulligan referred to him in a deferential way as young Dr. Kilbane; when he entered the locker room he found a statement pasted up on the bulletin board outlining the duties of the newly formed maternity squad, Joseph J. Kilbane, acting chief; when he went upstairs to the chief inspector's office two or three persons waw-wawed blithely after him from the crowd gathered outside police court.

He endured all that; he had to. But at half-past five, as he came on Janet S. Harrington—Miss Pulitzer, Scoop, Byline—occupied with a cup of coffee and a sandwich in the basement cafeteria, he licked his lips gently and then touched her once on the tip of the left shoulder.

"Swell story," Detective Joseph J. Kilbane said; his dark blue eyes glittered down at her. "Nice going, I'd call it. There's the kind of stuff that's going to get you places fast, sister."

Janet S. Harrington thought it was pretty good herself. The *Tribune's* city editor had liked it. He—

"Sure. He knows first-rate stuff," Kilbane told her, with a painful grin she seemed to accept as quite in order. "Suppose I buy you a drink on it tonight? Ten thirty, say. At the ramp entrance, Byline."

"Byline?" she said. "Oh! You're not angry about it, for heaven's sake?"

"Me?" Kilbane said. He went off, the grin clamped in place. It was later that night, when he had Miss Pulitzer secure from interruptions behind a table in the nearest cocktail lounge, that he drew up the points of arraignment over the one drink he ever intended to buy anyone like *her*.

"I wasn't anything much," he said, after a first few matters—common decency among them – had been made clear to her. "Just old Joe Stooge—Officer Pup waiting for the brick to hit him. You had a column to be funny in—that's what mattered. And if you had to crucify somebody in print, why, that part was all right. It was nothing you—"

"Crucify?" Miss Pulitzer said. Now she seemed exasperated. "Of course that's ridiculous. I should think you'd be—"

"What?" Kilbane asked, his voice throbbing. "Pleased, maybe. Tickled to death. Because I got my name in a cheap rag, in a smart-aleck, smirking story—"

"Cheap what?" Miss Pulitzer demanded, with some excitement. "Let me tell you something. The *Tribune*—"

Kilbane thumped his chest. Af-

terward that seemed a lot too dramatic, but at the moment distinctions were beyond him. "I'm kind of proud of being a cop. I like it. It ain't funny to me and I'm the kind of guy that doesn't want it to be funny to other people. That's another laugh, I guess. That's not big stuff, like New York. You know it's a laugh because you're a couple of months off the Yaphank *Gazette* and you got everything and everybody figured out. But what you—"

There Miss Pulitzer, losing whatever remained of her self-control, pointed a trembling cigarette at him.

"You shut up," she said. "Shut up right now, do you hear? You don't even know what you're talking about. The—the Yaphank *Gazette!* I never saw—"

Kilbane reached for his hat. "There's a lot you never saw," he told her. His voice shook slightly, to his fury. "I guess there's a lot a girl like you is never going to see."

He stalked off without looking back, without stopping at the cashier's desk either; when he realized afterward that he must have saddled her with the check it provided him a moment of sullen satisfaction. From the cocktail lounge, still simmering inside, he visited S. Pasquariella for the regular nightly checkup, and there he asked the usual questions without wasting very much time over them: Had anyone, Kilbane wanted to know, been around today to talk to him? Had anyone tried to bother him?

S. Pasquariella, a wiry little man with bushy black hair and glowing black eyes, dismissed that matter with a Latin gesture richly expressive of contempt. Those fellas kept away from him; you betcha, kid. Something else was on his mind. Last night he had not thanked Kilbane. Last night—he gripped Kilbane's forearm, smiling sheepishly and jerking his head toward the bedroom upstairs. The boy—he was a fine boy, eh?

Kilbane put his hand on the knob. Unmatchable anywhere, Kilbane assured him.

"Bambino," S. Pasquariella murmured in a tender voice to himself. "We call him—" He paused, took a deep breath before the plunge, and then without looking at Kilbane punched him lightly and very self-consciously in the stomach. "We call him Salvatore Kilbane Pasquariella. For me—for you. This thing what I say I no say so good. But what I mean, Joe—"

He nodded, very earnestly and at the same time rather shyly; his eyes searched Kilbane's astounded face. Nice guy, this Joe—S. Pasquariella got that out with some effort. All right, you betcha. S. Pasquariella liked and admired him. That's why he had thought—he stopped, smiling painfully at Kilbane's chin. He waited.

"Admired who?" Kilbane asked him after a moment, his ears and

the back of his neck slightly flushed. "You ain't got much sense, Salvatore."

"No," S. Pasquariella said humbly. "But—you like it, Joe?"

"I don't know," Kilbane said. He was more in command of himself then. "Nobody ever wanted to name a kid after me before. It's okay, I guess. If you can stand it, I suppose I ought to be tickled to death."

He was, in a way, though he would never have admitted it to anyone. Still, when he thought of Miss Pulitzer eventually, and of the time Miss Pulitzer could have with something like this, he was not very much disturbed; but by that time, of course, it was after the third glass of wine in S. Pasquariella's kitchen. Miss Pulitzer was no one to worry about, no one to fret over, from there on in.

During the next ten days he ran into her occasionally at headquarters. Then the procedure never varied: Miss Pulitzer's cool stare would pierce all the way through Detective Kilbane, and at the same moment Detective Kilbane would gaze absently at a point in space some two or three inches above her head. There was nothing to be said any more. Miss Pulitzer understood that and so did he.

Two Saturdays later, the afternoon before the christening, he bought a silver cup and spoon for Salvatore Kilbane Pasquariella at a downtown baby shop; and that night at ten o'clock, coming back to headquarters after a bit of excitement over by the waterfront, he picked up an early edition of the Sunday morning *Tribune*.

It appeared that Miss Pulitzer was doing all right for herself. Jack Garrity's weekly feature—*Over a Headquarters Desk*—had her name underneath it now, and Kilbane spared a moment to glance contemptuously through that pile of guff. The last paragraph, in italics, was adorned by the picture of a crystal ball on the side. Inside stuff, Kilbane thought sourly. Right off the— His throat got very dry then, because in Miss Pulitzer's chattiest style he began to read that odds on the conviction of Samuel J. (Little Sammy) Gordon at his trial for murder next month were now five to one in favor of the prosecution.

There was an eyewitness to the shooting, kept undercover and very hush-hush by the higher-ups, who would be the State's big surprise at the proper time. Miss Pulitzer advised her readers to watch for him. "Once over, not too lightly" would be the D.A.'s watchword.

Kilbane read that part twice. No, he thought then, not even Miss Pulitzer would be dumb enough— he raced off to the chief inspector's office, clutching the paper, and about a minute and a half later, bursting out through the ramp entrance with Beatty and Tom Wilshaw, he rammed head-on into Miss Pulitzer.

"So you did it," he said thickly.

"You went and—who told you about Salvatore?"

She blazed up at once. "Who told me?" She mimicked him. "Salvatore told me when I met him coming in here yesterday afternoon. Did you observe that I failed to mention his name? I'm not a fool, you know. And if you've got the faintest idea that you can bully me into ignoring legitimate news—"

"Legitimate news," Kilbane said. He could not seem to get enough breath into him. "He told you because he'd seen you with me. Because he never thought you'd go ahead and plaster it all over the city."

His right fist pounded the air. Did she know where Charlton Street was? Right by Salvatore's barber shop. That's where Little Sammy knocked off his friend; that's where Salvatore practically watched him do it. He was closing up that night—had the lights off—when it happened. The department hadn't let that get out because there were some others mixed up in it who'd do their best to take care of an eyewitness. They were still running loose. Now they saw what they had to do to protect themselves.

"But that's absurd," Miss Pulitzer faltered. She was just a little breathless. "From what I wrote they could never—"

Kilbane put his face close to her. Maybe she forgot the phrase she used—once over, not too lightly. They'd get it. Anyone with the brains of a fly would get it. A barber, sure. They'd look for a barber and they wouldn't have to look past the corner of Charlton Street, where the shooting came off. Salvatore was the only barber in the neighborhood. Did Miss Janet S. Harrington understand everything now?

Tom Wilshaw honked at him from the car. "Wait," Miss Pulitzer said. "Kilbane—" He did not wait. He swung onto the car as it circled around the guardrail, and three minutes later he swung off it before S. Pasquariella's barber shop. That was locked and dark now, and after a hurried consultation they split up in front of it. Tom Wilshaw and Beatty sought information in a couple of nearby stores; Kilbane went on down to the house in the next block.

He had pushed the door open, not waiting tonight to ring the bell, when Miss Pulitzer got out of a cab behind him. She followed him into the hall without a word; she did not look or act like Miss Pulitzer at all. In the parlor Angelica Therese put down an accordion and Christina Marie slid off the piano stool. A stout woman, coming out of the kitchen, blushed rosily and hid her mouth with her hand when she saw Kilbane.

She told him that Salvatore was not in yet; on Saturday after work he did the marketing. But soon, any minute now—

"We'll wait a while," Kilbane

said. His heart was pounding. They sat down in the parlor and the two girl children, preparing a repertoire for the celebration tomorow, played something or other when Mrs. S. Pasquariella nodded vigorously at them. Kilbane was given some wine and managed to touch his lips to it; later, with Miss Pulitzer, he went upstairs and admired Salvatore Kilbane Pasquariella, an infinitesimal peanut snoring placidly in an old-fashioned rocker crib.

Downstairs again they listened to Santa Lucia as interpreted on the accordion by Angelica Therese and on the piano by Christina Marie. In the middle of it Kilbane answered the doorbell and held a low-voiced conversation with Beatty and Tom Wilshaw on the white flagstone. He learned that a quarter past nine, not long after the *Tribune* appeared on the streets, Salvatore had walked out of the barber shop with two strangers. No one had seen him since.

For a moment after closing the door Kilbane leaned his shoulders against it. Then, his face much the same as ever, he went back to the parlor. "We'll get in touch with Salvatore," he announced loudly, surprised that the words came out as well as they did. "Now I guess we'd better be pushing along."

He drove Miss Pulitzer home. "They got men out," he told her quietly, after she whispered her address to him. "Better men than me. You don't have to worry about Salvatore. You aren't, are you?"

She did not answer him; she did not bawl either; whatever was inside her—and Kilbane realized soberly that there must be pretty much—she was managing to keep inside her. But over on Appleton Street, when he pulled up behind a maroon roadster parked in front of her apartment house, she failed to get out after he walked around the car and opened the door for her.

He glanced down at her, at the side of her face and at the hands all knotted up in her lap; then, because it seemed best to leave her alone for a minute or two, he went on up the stoop and into the vestibule. That was already occupied. A red-headed man, very broad through the shoulders, looked up at him without friendliness and then shifted position on a stone bench near the stairs.

Kilbane did not pay any attention to him. He walked past him to the row of bells and fussed around there momentarily; then, as if he had pressed one without receiving an answer, he went out mumbling to himself. He had seen the red-headed man before, standing sullenly beside Sammy Gordon in a morning lineup. But at that time the red-headed man had been on an illuminated stage, while Detective Kilbane sat half a dozen rows back in a darkened auditorium. That was why he knew the red-headed man, and why the red-

headed man did not know him.

Before he reached the steps a good many details had dropped miraculously into place. They had Salvatore – they'd had him since nine fifteen–but what Kilbane had forgotten was that Salvatore was nobody's fool. If he denied everything they'd be careful with him because they were in a spot where they had to be careful, and because Miss Pulitzer, as she said, had mentioned no names. They had a lead, but if they had not broken Salvatore, they could not be positive that it was the right lead. So they got a phone book and looked up the Janet S. Harrington who had signed the column and after that they sent the red-headed man over here to talk to her.

It was not very complicated. By the time he reached the car Kilbane understood the main points well enough to shape them into eight or nine sentences directed at the top of Miss Pulitzer's round hat.

She looked up at him blindly. What was he trying to tell her? That–

"Keep it low," Kilbane warned her. He wanted to be very calm himself, but a couple of hundred pinpoints that were each as small and hard as the tip of an ice pick had drawn themselves up into a complete circle around his chest. "He won't want to bring you over where Salvatore is; you've got to make him. You've got to tell him that you don't know Salvatore's name, that you only saw him once when someone pointed him out to you at headquarters. You can't describe him very well, either, but you'd know him if you saw him again. Got that straight?"

He had pulled down ahead of the maroon roadster to the next corner. He parked there.

"Yes." Miss Pulitzer answered him very quietly and without a tremor. "I understand perfectly. I'll go with him and you'll follow us–"

Kilbane nodded. That was the ticket. She'd sit here for five minutes so that he'd have a chance to line things up. After that – He looked narrowly at her. She understood that this wasn't a picnic, didn't she? She understood that she didn't have to do it? It was a good way, but it wasn't the only way.

Miss Pulitzer turned to him, her face blazing with cold excitement. If he tried to stop her now– "All right," Kilbane said. He patted her hand reassuringly, understanding that a girl like this was all right in fundamentals; she was a lot cooler now, for instance, than Joseph J. Kilbane. Before she left the car – a department car – he made contact with headquarters by means of the two-way radio, and not very long after that several black sedans with no police insignia on them were cutting over to Appleton Street from City Hall Square.

They were all in place when Miss Pulitzer came down the stoop with

the red-headed man and got into the maroon roadster with him. O'Hare and Conlon were two blocks ahead, near the park, and O'Hare and Conlon picked them up on the fly. That was the best arrangement, since there'd be no car swinging out right after him to make the red-headed man suspicious, but it was one that was very hard on Kilbane.

On another avenue a block west, hunched forward over the wheel, he followed the directions relayed to him—east on Appleton, north on Chestnut. It was a long ride, and all the way he kept telling himself senselessly that he should never have let her go off alone. But in the end nothing went wrong; when the maroon roadster stopped outside an apartment house at Thirty-second and Greenwood he was only two blocks away from it on a parallel road.

O'Hare and Conlon were right behind him; Ed Patterson, who had taken over for the last part of the trip, met them at the corner; Beatty and Tom Wilshaw also appeared from somewhere, but despite the crowd Kilbane got into the lobby first.

Arrangements were made there after they found out that the apartment was 4E, and that in addition to someone who almost certainly was S. Pasquariella, it held a girl and three men. They started upstairs in a creaking elevator, Kilbane breathing slowly and deeply. They got off at four and O'Hare stopped them all before a brass 4E glittering against dark wood.

"All right," O'Hare said. "We wait till we hear Beatty and Ed Patterson out back. Then!"

Kilbane looked at him. "To hell with that," Kilbane said, through his teeth. It was no time for waiting—not for Kilbane. He set his revolver almost flush with the lock, fired twice into it, rammed one heel viciously into what the bullets left and plunged far off balance into a long and empty living-room.

The red-headed man appeared in a doorway across from him. He was shouting back to someone and trying frantically to get a gun out from under his shoulder. After Kilbane shot him precisely through the chest without breaking stride, event seemed to move on into event without any intervening time lapse at all.

Later, much later—that was the way it came back to Kilbane, at any rate—he appeared to reach the inner doorway immediately after he burst through the outer one, and the very moment that he did reach it he sprawled forward over a little sallow-faced man crouched down just in front of him. He landed on a dining-room table that was eight feet long and as smooth as ice; he sped down it on his left arm and the side of his left leg.

It must have been an impressive entrance. The tablecloth wrapped itself around him and a bowl of

flowers in the center got all tangled up in his left armpit. On the far end he sailed off into a chair and carried that majestically with him against the wall. He had one swirling glimpse of the sallow-faced man running out of the dining-room and into O'Hare. Then he landed.

A dapper young man with crisp blond hair raced out of the kitchen and fired quickly at him with his left hand. Kilbane shot back from an impossible angle, wondering for a moment—he must have been badly dazed by the fall—why left-handed people always had such a smooth, deft way of handling themselves. O'Hare, Conlon, Beatty, Tom Wilshaw, and the sallow-faced man poured into the room; S. Pasquariella stood over the blond young fellow and waved the remains of a kitchen chair venomously in the air. Everyone was there—everyone but Miss Pulitzer. Kilbane himself, moving only a pair of wild blue eyes, lay with his right shoulder piled into the wall, his knees drawn up under him and his nose dug deep into the carpet.

He breathed something when he could—he'd known it, he'd known it. Wobbling, the gun still in his hand, he got up and staggered out to the kitchen. Dark. Empty. And the incredible part lay in the fact that he was the only one worried about her. Back in the dining-room O'Hare was lighting a cigar and stirring the left-handed man with a contemplative toe.

"Eh?" O'Hare said, when Kilbane croaked something. "What's the matter with you?"

Kilbane staggered by him into the bedroom. She was there, trying to light a cigarette and handle the phone at the one time—the same old Miss Pulitzer. He looked at her for a moment and then he attempted to help her. One sleeve was ripped away from his coat and his shirt bore a fragment of tablecloth and a few crushed flower petals. His nose was bleeding. The moment she saw him Miss Pulitzer said, "St-st-st-st," with disapproval.

"I fell," Kilbane said. "Over the table," he added, with a vague gesture toward the dining-room. "I bet you were beginning to think you lost me."

"Oh, no," Miss Pulitzer said, sharp as ever. "I heard you come in." But after that, when her city editor's voice barked out of the earpiece, she took a moment to reach up one hand and brush a couple of the flower petals away from him. And she said, very softly for Miss Pulitzer, "I'm all right, you know. Were you afraid I wasn't?"

Was he? Kilbane couldn't figure anything out. He nodded though. She spoke something into the mouthpiece and then she opened her handbag and took her handkerchief out of it.

"As if you had to do it all," she said. "Now sit down some place where I can't see you and wipe your nose."

She went with him to the christening Sunday afternoon, and when they got out of his car before S. Pasquariella's house Kilbane showed her the silver cup and spoon and asked what she thought of them.

"They're very nice," Miss Pulitzer said. "Monogrammed, too."

"Well," Kilbane said, taking credit only where credit was due, "that was free. I think it looks pretty nice. S.K.P. You know what the K's for? Kilbane."

"Oh," she said, without adding anything smart. There was no need for her to take his arm, either, but she did that, too, and Kilbane was not very much upset about it. Maybe it meant something; maybe it didn't. Kilbane intended to find out.

Inside, in a very busy parlor, the girl children of S. Pasquariella swung into something or other on a one-two-three piano and accordion duet. It sounded fine to Kilbane.

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Life in India is not all moonlight and sacred temples . . .

THE LIVING BRACELET

by ROBERT BLOCH

IT WAS A HOT NIGHT, EVEN FOR India. Vickery was just mixing a gin-and-splash when he heard the discreet tap at the hotel room door.

"Sarah?" he muttered.

A man entered quickly and quietly, bolting the door behind him.

"I'm Fenner," he said. "Sarah's husband." He grinned down at Vickery in the chair. "Surprised to see me? Sarah was."

"Really, now." Vickery started to rise.

"Don't bother," Fenner told him. "Just stay where you are." Still grinning, he pulled the big Webley out of his jacket and pointed it at Vickery's stomach.

"Sitting target," Vickery said. "Not very sporting, old boy."

"You're a fine one to talk about sportmanship, after what you did with my wife. Great White Hunter, eh? Adjoining hotel rooms and all —must have been quite a safari."

Vickery sighed. "I suppose there's no sense my denying it. So shoot and be hanged."

"Just the point. I don't mean to be hanged. So I won't shoot." Still holding the gun, Fenner fumbled in his jacket pocket and produced a small leather pouch. He opened it gingerly, then dropped a squirming, brilliantly colored object at Vickery's feet. It looked like a tiny coral bracelet, but it was alive.

"Better not move," Fenner muttered. "Yes, it's a krait. Deadliest little snake in the world, they say."

"Fenner, wait, listen to me—"

The tiny coral bracelet suddenly uncoiled. Before Vickery could draw back, pink lightning struck. Again and again the krait sunk its fangs into Vickery's right leg, through the thin trouser cloth.

Vickery gasped and closed his eyes, making no move to crush the serpent. Suddenly it subsided sluggishly and coiled up again in the center of the carpet.

Fenner gulped, wiped his forehead, and rose. He put the gun over on the table. "I'll leave this," he said. "Maybe you'll want to use it. They tell me that in less than ten minutes—"

Vickery chuckled. "Fenner, you *are* a mug!"

"What do you mean?"

"A bazaar native sells you a

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harmless grass snake and you take his word that it's a krait. Just as you took the word of a jealous woman that we were having an affair. Actually, old boy, she was miffed because I wanted no part of her." Vickery chuckled again. "Not a gallant statement, I admit."

"You don't expect me to swallow that, do you?"

"Suit yourself." Vickery waved a hand. "Oh, don't go. Sit down and have a peg with me. Nothing's going to happen—you'll soon see."

And nothing did happen, except that Fenner had his drink, and a short talk which fully convinced him that Vickery was as innocent and harmless as the tiny snake that was curled up on the carpet.

When he left, he apologized profusely to Vickery for everything. He'd sent Sarah packing on the first plane to London, and planned to follow her in the morning.

Vickery wished him godspeed. "Take your gun," he said. "And the snake, too. You needn't bother with the pouch—just put it in your pocket. Snakes love warmth and body contact."

After Fenner left for the adjoining room formerly occupied by his wife, Vickery continued his preparation for retiring. His mind busied itself with mathematical calculations. How long would it be, for example, until Sarah arrived in London and he could put through a call? How much had she said the old boy was worth? And just how long would it take for that krait to stir in annoyance in Fenner's pocket and strike through the cloth into his fat flesh? The answer to the last was provided quickly.

Vickery heard the man screaming through the thin wall of the adjoining room—at the precise moment that he sat down on the bed and unbuckled the straps of his artificial leg.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WILLIAM FAY**

TITLE: ***Just Because You're Human***

TYPE: Detective Story

LOCALE: Bronx, New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *When a detective is killed in line of duty, the tragedy has many expanding ripples: fiancée, mother, partner, colleagues, and the affront to law and order . . . A fine human interest story, with a big heart.*

GEORGE HAWLEY, THE DETECTIVE, wasn't twenty feet from Joe Regis, his partner and friend, when Joe was shot to death by Ralphie Dee. This happened at night, on a rainswept boulevard in the Borough of the Bronx. The way it happened, so strangely and so fast, it was more like something witnessed than a role performed. Hawley placed a bullet in the center of Ralphie Dee's unreasoning head, as Ralphie fired a second time.

Then Hawley fell forward into the street, settling within a circle of light cast by a street lamp overhead. He was not unconscious, but he could not get up. The rain kept beating on them where they lay—Hawley, Joe Regis, and Ralphie Dee, whom the cops had wanted now for more than a year and a half. The fumes from a halted bus washed warmly into Hawley's face.

"Don't touch him," he heard somebody say, and this was probably a cop. Hawley could hear the approach of sirens now from not far away, less shrill in the fat and walloping rain than they would have sounded at another time.

God be good to Marge, he prayed.

Later on, when things were bet-

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originally titled, "Goodbye, Joe"

ter settled in his mind, he would begin to wonder why this was the only thing he had prayed for when the bullet brought him down. What about Joe Regis, who was lying dead in the street?

It was three days after the event that Walter Rosen, a lieutenant of detectives, was permitted to enter Hawley's hospital room. Rosen was a pink-scalped, oddly freckled little man of fifty, as clean as a new-blown bubble of soap. He looked more like a lingerie salesman than a tough, experienced cop.

"I'm glad you're still with us, Georgie," Rosen said.

They were friends. Neither rank nor the twenty years that separated their ages was an embarrassment. The older man sat at Hawley's bedside, his hands folded neatly in his lap. Winter daylight flooded the quiet room. The sky, or as much as Hawley could see of it, was a soft madonna-blue; then he remembered again: *two funerals today,* and he could tell, from the way the sun had climbed, that it was noon.

"How was it at the church this morning?" Hawley asked.

"I'm not the best judge, George. I'd say it was very respectful. The mayor was there and the borough president. The young cops wore their white gloves and they paraded like cadets. Marge was there. She walked with Joe's mother. They both did very well."

"Thank you, Walter. That's what I wanted to know."

His eyes had filled quickly, and while he wasn't ashamed, he didn't want to get sloppy. Rosen looked down at the pudgy fingers entwined in his lap. He cracked his knuckles all at once.

It was like a quick, soft chorus of crickets.

"They also buried Ralphie Dee today, George," Rosen said, but Hawley didn't reply to that. "I heard he got as many flowers as Joe got. It could even be that he got more."

"God is going to add up all the flowers, Walter?"

"I didn't mean it that way. You know that."

"I'm sorry," Hawley said.

"I'm trying to make a point," Rosen said, "or I'd never have brought it up. Dead or alive, you have to admit that Ralphie was a flashy and popular punk. Every hoodlum from Yonkers to Brooklyn was at the funeral, I'm told except his brother, Julie. The coffin looked like a prize float off the boardwalk at Atlantic City."

"So?"

"I'm thinking of the kind of reaction that might set in."

"I don't get it, Walter."

"The inspector and I could be 'way off base, but it's something to think about," Rosen said. "I've seen criminals sentimentalized by their admirers until there's no possible resemblance between the punk they buried and the gilded ghost they remember. Don't expect them

to love you, George, and keep Ralphie's crazy brother in mind. If Julie gets it into his twisted head that he wants to be a hero, too—then you could be his short-cut to fame."

"I'll get scared when I feel better," Hawley said.

His hands closed tightly on the bedsheet at his chest. Ralphie and Julie Dee, he thought; you couldn't match them against the life and merits of Joe Regis by any standard that wasn't debased. The measure of their importance was that they had broken bail and disappeared while under indictment for extortion and for murder in the 2nd degree. It seemed to Hawley that he had known both Ralphie and Julie for the length of all the days he could remember—since they were kids; and if Ralphie had grown to be a big man by the width of his smile, the cut of his clothes, or the size of the cars he used to drive—well, the world was a pit for pigs.

"How long you figure you'll be laid up?" Rosen asked.

"A couple of months, they say." The bullet, he'd been told, after entering his left side, had courteously avoided his heart, but then gone on to rip him up pretty well. "I guess there'll be no running upstairs. No bowling for a long time. Things like that."

"You don't mind talking about the other night?"

"I figure it's past time. Go ahead."

"The way that Ralphie had to pop up like a duck in the rain is the strangest part," Rosen said. "You don't know where he was headed when you spotted him?"

"I never spotted him, Walter. Joe did that. It might have been the way Ralphie walked, a turn of his head, or anything. All I heard Joe say was 'Stop the car,' and I stopped it." Then Hawley said carefully, deliberately, "I was listening to the radio when it happened. I think you should bear that in mind."

The older man said, "Why?"

"I wasn't listening to police calls," Hawley said. "We had the car radio on, of course, but I wasn't paying much attention to that. I had a portable radio on the seat right next to me. Tommy Cassiano was fighting in the Garden. I was listening to every punch." He watched the other man closely. "You figure it, Walter."

Rosen gazed back over his steepled fingers. "Why should I bother?"

"If I hadn't been listening to the fight like that, I might have been more on the job—the same as Joe was on the job."

"Come off it, George. Don't build yourself troubles you'll regret. The radio wasn't even yours. It belonged to Joe Regis. We checked that after we found it in the car."

"I asked him to bring it," Hawley insisted. "Two or three times, anyhow, I said to him, 'Bring the portable, Joe.' It was a present he got from Marge on his last birth-

day. A real nice portable. I kept saying, 'Bring it.'"

"Joe wasn't listening? He wasn't a friend of Tommy's?"

"That's not the point. You have to take it for granted Joe would never have goofed off. Radio, or no radio, Walter."

"Oh, shut up, please!" Rosen was a very mild man whose voice squeaked like a nickel whistle on those rare occasions when his patience gave out. "You've got one of those in-grown Irish consciences, and a stupid one at that. You're trying to make a case against yourself and I won't have one damned bit of it, and neither will the Inspector!"

Hawley said softly, "Thanks. I thought I'd tell you, anyhow. I always figured Joe was better than us."

"You could be right, too," Walter Rosen conceded. "But if it's any comfort, I was in Tommy Cassiano's own saloon with three other cops, watching him get his brains knocked out on the teevee set. We weren't as close to Tommy as you and Joe."

"I see what you mean."

"Don't give up on yourself just because you're human, George," the older man advised him.

Then Walter Rosen left.

Hawley slept until it was mid-afternoon and the shadows had climbed the walls of his room. He was smoking a cigarette and thinking of a promised cup of coffee when the nurse looked in the door.

"There's someone to see you. Do you mind?"

"It's all right," Hawley said.

He knew it was Marge before he saw her in the open door. She walked toward him slowly, hardly making a sound with her steep heels on the polished floor. Her cheeks were as pale as aspirin. Her eyes, in the faded, fitful light, were dark and shadowy, indistinct. All Hawley could see was the soft, the gentle, the sad line of her mouth —Marge, who in another time could be as gay or as giddy as a game of tag.

"Hello, George," she said, but the first time he tried to answer her he couldn't make a sound come out. "George—is it all right that I came?"

"It's all right—sure . . . you know it's all right . . . of course it's all right . . ."

It was almost as though, once started with words and with sounds, he couldn't turn them off, and he began to cry, because there was more in him than he could hold, and the girl who was to have married Joe Regis broke at the same time, grasping his arms with her black-gloved hands, falling to her knees at the side of his bed. It was awful, as long as it lasted. After a while, though it tugged at his wound and made him ache inside, he reached the bed lamp and snapped it on. They blinked in the glare.

"Go ahead," he said. "Go in the

bathroom and blow your nose. Get straightened out. Don't mind a blubbering jerk like me."

"I'm all right now." Marge took the chair that Walter Rosen had occupied. "I came to see you because—who else would I see? Who else would understand how it is?"

"No one," he said, because it was so obviously true. "I'm glad you came." He didn't want to get schmaltzy or emotional. He couldn't trust himself. He'd loved her for all the six years she had gone with Joe; maybe not from the moment Joe said, "This is Marge," but all too soon, in secret and in shame, as though, like any vice more definable, it was something a better man would have managed to set aside. "Do you want a cigarette, Marge?"

"Thank you." She reached for the pack he indicated.

"Light one for me."

She lit a second one from the burning end of the first. He took it from her gloved hand. *A gloved hand doesn't feel much like a girl's hand,* Hawley thought; it felt like anything else—a piece of plastic, a stick. He had never seen her all in black before: hat, little veil, gloves, dress, the coat that she had folded in her lap. She looked like a lost nun, or the widow that she would have been were it later in the year.

"What are you thinking about, George?"

"Not too much," he said. "It's as though we weren't here in our real selves, Marge—so solemn and scared, the two of us—and afraid to mention Joe. Any other time we'd be—well, clowning around, the way friends do. You know what I mean?"

"Of course I do." She smiled a little bit. She was as tired as he—more tired, perhaps, and with a better right. He turned his face and let it rest against the softness of the pillow. A lazy cloud of cigarette smoke lay between them. "I'll go now, George. I'll let you rest."

"It was good you came," he said. "It was very nice."

She stood up and he watched her come toward him. He didn't move as she leaned over him. He ached with longing that seemed treasonously wrong each moment she was near.

"Thank God it wasn't the two of you, George."

She kissed his forehead, lightly and quickly, as any friend, in a bad time, being kind, would have the right to do. He dared not move or make a response until she had turned away.

"Let's not get sloppy," he said finally. "Thanks for coming in."

"Goodbye, George," Marge said.

After she was gone, he had no luck with attempted sleep. He was staring at his own hands and the random items in the room when Tommy Cassiano came. Miss Colvin, the nurse, let Tommy in, but with obvious misgivings.

"I brought you a pizza pie and some beer from the joint," Tommy said, "but they took it off me outside, like it was a bomb. That makes this a hell of a party, don't it, George?"

Hawley was off the job two months and twenty-three days on the extended sick leave the department prescribed. This Saturday in May, in the last week of his "convalescence," he felt healthier than he believed an idle man had any right to feel. A scale outside a drugstore told him he had gained nine pounds.

He walked on Southern Boulevard, in his own section of the Bronx, a half mile south of where "it" had happened in the February rain. From where he walked he could see the planes begin to slant down for the runways of La Guardia, as flashy as newly minted tin against the pale blue of the sky. The lush May morning was like joy distilled. He wasn't even dismayed to meet a man named Buster Stark, a prosperous personality of unestablished livelihood, whose jail terms had been infrequent, painless, brief. Buster, in resplendent clothes, was taking his ease against the plate-glass window of a haberdashery.

"Well, Buster?" Hawley said.

"Well?" Buster said right back at him. "Well?"

He's pretty starchy, Hawley thought, but this was not surprising. He'd been a pal of Ralphie Dee's.

"I haven't seen you around much, Buster."

"I go to a lot of very nice and expensive places. You wouldn't know about them, Hawley."

"What do you use for money?"

"I'm so charmin' that people invite me to these places. I don't need money." Buster blew a shiny, membranous bubble of chewing gum, exhibited it briefly at the tip of his tongue, then popped it artfully. "Do you need money, Hawley?"

"You'd better go home and squeeze the custard out of your fat head, Buster," Hawley suggested. "A few more remarks and I'll have to punch you in the mouth—just for the exercise."

Hawley walked on. He had already learned to respect Walter Rosen's prediction that he would be perversely enshrined in the memories of Ralphie Dee's admirers. It bothered him less than it should have, he supposed, because he was himself involved in emotional hypocrisy. His frequent meetings with Marge were not accidental. As a thief coordinates his opportunities with time and place, he had contrived to enter the orbit of her changed activities, now that Joe was gone.

Each Saturday morning she did the marketing for Joe's mother, Mrs. Regis, at the Boulevard Exchange, a local supermarket. On weekday afternoons, at 5:45, the

subway returned her from her job downtown, and while you couldn't do it every time, it wasn't difficult to be buying the paper or cigarettes when she turned the corner for home. Helping out at a church bazaar had been easier still, since as chairman of the refreshment committee she had openly asked his help.

"We'll need a real smart detective to guard the mustard pot and split the rolls, George," Marge had said. "You might as well be useful."

"Not for me," he said. "I look stupid in an apron."

"Father Ricciardi asked if I'd speak to you, George. He'd like to have somebody working besides the women."

"Do you think I'm a chump?"

"Well, yes – but a nice one, George."

Actually he hadn't had to split any frankfurter rolls. They arrived at the parish auditorium already split, in wax-paper bags as long as your arm. For six nights he had scalded his fingers plucking hot dogs from the spaghetti cauldrons he had borrowed from Tommy Cassiano's place. He hadn't minded. He had been grateful and happy merely to be with her. She had always been gayer and more openly nonsensical with him than she had been with Joe, which was natural, he reasoned, since her deeper feelings were not involved. You couldn't expect her to show the same respect for a clown like him that she had shown for Joe Regis.

I've got to stop trailing her like a lost dog, he resolved, and for this reason he did not stop at the Boulevard Exchange. He figured a man with any pride at all could wait until that evening.

"George, how are the straws holding out?" Marge said. "The things people sip through? Are you listening?"

"Oh, the straws," he said. "We're all out of them. Do you have much soda left?"

"One case of root beer and a little orange."

"Well, the rest they can drink out of the bottles. It's an old Bronx custom."

"Are you tired, George?"

"My feet, that's all. That's the thanks the taxpayer gets for motorizing the cop. No stamina in the feet."

"You're so silly, George, honestly."

He supposed he was, but not for the reasons she'd advance. He was cleaning one of Tommy Cassiano's big spaghetti pots. Saint Charles Borromeo's Annual Building Fund Bazaar was over—all but the sweeping up, a final counting of the gross receipts, and a little free eating for those who had labored through the week.

Joe's mother, Mrs. Regis, was talking with Father Ricciardi at the fortuneteller's booth. The priest had earlier explained that it wasn't a

sin to have your fortune told for 50¢ – not if you paid cash at the booth and made a mental reservation to place no credence whatever in what Mrs. Regis said. Father Ricciardi walked over.

"You have a big night, George?"

"I only work here, Father." Hawley indicated Marge. "She hasn't let me near the money once. All I got so far was a stale roll and a promise you'd pray for me."

"He's crazy," Marge said. "Excuse me, Father."

She carried a cup of coffee to the mother-in-law she had almost but not quite acquired. Mrs. Regis, still dressed in the slap-dash gypsy costume she had fashioned for herself, did not look any less Irish. She was small, soft-spoken, and uncomplaining. She was also, in Hawley's eyes, pathetically brave.

"It's been good for both of them, having you around, George," Father Ricciardi said. "Thank Tommy for the use of the pots when you see him–and one other thing."

Hawley waited.

"Watch yourself in the neighborhood," the priest advised him soberly. "On my job, you hear more things than a cop ever does."

"If it's Ralphie Dee's friends – well, I'm not worried, Father."

"Then you'd better start worrying just a little bit. We're counting on having you around for next year's bazaar."

Marge came back to the refreshment stand with Mrs. Regis. They looked strangely correct together, like widows divided by thirty years, yet joined in some understanding that a man could not expect to penetrate. Marge took the cup and saucer from the older woman and put them down. She wore Joe's ring on her right hand now–the ¾ carat, blue-white job, modest but flawless, and, as was always Joe's way, paid for, cash on the line.

"Well, George," Mrs. Regis said, "you can get yourself a job in a lunch wagon now, if they ever put you off the force." She began to unwind the bandanna that bound her head. "Honestly now, George –how do I strike you as a gypsy?"

"I've arrested grown women for less," Hawley said. "I think you'd better let me walk you home."

"I'm going home with Mrs. Foley," she said, "and we will manage very well."

Hawley and Marge walked east from the parish auditorium. They walked slowly, talking the way you do when you are established friends, with common reference to a thousand things. The breeze was soft. It cast a few strands of her hair in easy disarray.

"Who donated the coffee tonight, Marge?" Hawley asked. "I mean that second batch."

"One of the plasterers' locals. Father Ricciardi knows the delegate and they were having a dance. I think they sent us fourteen gallons. It wasn't good, was it?"

"They must have dropped a trowel in it," he said. "Would you like to stop off at Tommy's place and have him put a fresh pot on?"

"It's late," she said, "but I wouldn't mind."

When they got to Southern Boulevard, where the old apartment houses couldn't cancel the view, the moon hung like a skinned and deep-toned melon in the sky. It cast a mellow glow across the rich green acres of the Bronx Zoo, where the "Borough Beautiful" is host to half the fauna of the world.

"I get them mixed up sometimes," Hawley said. "'Fauna' is meat and 'flora' is vegetables—I'm right?"

"You're so very, very clever, George."

Tommy's place was a few blocks south, on the other side. Even in the little parks that studded the breadth of Southern Boulevard, the trees were fat with the triumphant season; the earth was sweet beneath the narrow, wretched, trampled plots of grass.

"It's so beautiful, George."

"You couldn't buy it in a bottle," Hawley agreed.

Traffic was light, but very swift. A couple of cabs and a truck went by, gobbling all the distance a sequence of green lights would allow. George and Marge waited on a concrete island for a chance to cross. He took her arm and they hastened the rest of the way.

"You're doin' all right, Hawley."

George turned to the voice and the assembled figures in the dimly lighted entrance of a candy-stationery store. Buster Stark was empty-handed. Two of his three companions carried Sunday morning tabloids in their arms.

Marge said softly, urgently, "Don't stop!"

But Hawley lingered, as a cop would naturally be inclined to. He said to Buster, "What do you mean I'm 'doing all right?'"

Buster and his companions looked at Marge, while Buster made a rich, appreciative noise with his lips. Buster said, smiling, "I mean it didn't take you long to move in, Hawley."

George Hawley knocked Buster flat on his back with a classic punch in the mouth. Ralphie Dee's old friend came separate from his $30 hat. The blood welled in his open mouth. His eyes were open. He was knocked out. One of his companions had dropped the Sunday paper. The funny sheets had come loose and they lay all over the ground. Hawley kicked one sheet aside.

"Get up, Buster," he said, and the invitation was sincere. "I don't have a gun on me. I'm a convalescent, the department says. I'm telling you now, if I was three days dead I could still lick the four of you."

He walked on with Marge and she was silent at his side. He didn't look at her. A kind of nameless

shame enveloped him. He couldn't get himself to speak of Joe, but the implication raised by Buster Stark was there, as real and adhesive as summer sweat. Marge touched his arm. She was trembling.

"George, I don't think we should go to Tommy's. Take me home."

"All right," he said.

They had stopped on the sidewalk where the big street curved, beyond the view of Buster or his friends. There was a refuse basket, a mail box, and a fat tree where they stood. The glare of a street light filtered thinly through the leaves. The shadow of a laden bough dilated and contracted in a press of rising breeze. Marge was watching him. She was handsome, tall and straight-standing. Her closeness made his senses cry aloud.

"It wasn't your fault, George. I'm sorry. Nothing's your fault, honestly."

He leaned forward then and kissed her on the mouth as though he owned her. He held her tightly, all but convulsively, before he let her go. He wished he had a place to hide. He turned from her in confusion and slammed the mail box with the hams of his hands. He could hear her crying softly even now.

"I love you," he said. "What the hell's the use of trying to conceal it any more? It's like a sickness . . . and I'm sorry. I didn't have the decency to keep it to myself."

He stepped forward and stopped a cab in the street. He waited, holding the rear door open. Marge was pale and silent getting into the cab. Hawley gave the driver a dollar and her address, then walked away. It was better and quicker this way.

"I can give you coffee, beer, or a couple of aspirins," Tommy Cassiano said, "but I don't have nothin' for what ails you now. People are human, George. I keep learnin' it's a handicap, but what can you do? You want a pizza?"

"No, thanks," Hawley said.

It was 2:00 A.M. by the clock above the bar. Half a dozen tables were ringed with customers. The pizza fire burned brightly. Carlo, the chef, gaped out at Hawley from the kitchen. His thin face for some reason seemed a full shade paler than the white hat on his head. Tommy, at the bar, combed the overflow collar from a glass of beer, then set it down.

"Look, George," Tommy said, "anything you want to say about Joe Regis, I'll go along. You know the way I always felt about the guy. Joe wasn't as easy to know as a couple of slobs like you and me. That's because he had more character, you say. Well, so did St. Anthony, but he's as dead as Joe. You got to do with what you got, George. Do you follow me?"

"You're trying to be nice," Hawley said. "I was with Joe when he bought her the ring. I was with him when he paid for the furni

ture. I was his closest friend. I was with him till the minute he died—and I just made a pass at his girl."

"Drink the beer," Tommy said. He sighted and turned his dented profile to the kitchen. "Carlo!" he called, and Carlo came out, rubbing his hands on his apron. "Carlo," Tommy said, "tell George here what you heard tonight. Tell him who's in the Bronx right now."

Carlo came forward and placed his hands flat on the bar. He looked carefully, almost ritualistically about, then said in a whisper, "Julie Dee."

"Oh, come off the snuff now, Carlo," Hawley said. "Come off it, please."

"My cousin seen him."

"Where?" Hawley said. "What cousin?"

"His cousin didn't tell him where, George," Tommy interrupted, "and don't try to ask him 'What cousin?' Believe me when I tell you he's got all kinds. If this cousin's a liar, it's not Carlo's fault."

"It's crazy," Hawley said. "Julie's been wanted for almost two years. The cops'd pick him up in fifteen minutes."

"They picked up Ralphie, too," Tommy said, "but only after they picked up Joe. Julie is crazier than Ralphie ever was. Did you see any of their crowd tonight?"

"I saw Buster Stark."

"Did he see you?"

"He should have seen me," Hawley said. "Less than half an hour ago I punched him in the mouth."

"Oh, that's very sweet. You were with Marge then?"

"Of course I was with her." Hawley began to thump the bar, matching the steady beat of his imaginings. It wasn't likely, he told himself, but it was—well, it was possible.

"Where you goin' now?" Tommy asked.

"Just for a short walk," Hawley said. "Don't get excited. I'll be back before the beer gets flat."

Marge lived with her father, west of the boulevard, in an apartment house called The Sheldon Arms. A sign said: *Vacancy—4 Rooms—Refrigerator.* A cat walked down the five stained steps that led to the vestibule. The moon was big and well above the town. You could see all over the silent street.

George would have bet his life against a leather dime that Julie had not been here. He also knew that for the simple purpose of finding out, he could have telephoned. It was the other thing that brought him—the shameless need to see her and be with her, any time or any place, like a man addicted to anything—narcotics, whiskey, love.

"In the name of decency, George," Marge's father said, "this is one hell of a time to come ringin' a doorbell. Is she—what?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Horgan, I said—is she home?"

"She's not home," Marge's father

said, and Hawley's heart dropped like a stone. "She telephoned to say she's goin' to stay at Mrs. Regis's tonight. Have you been drinkin', George? Are you sick?"

"No, I'm all right, Mr. Horgan, thanks. I'm sorry I bothered you. I'll explain what it was tomorrow. Don't think I'm out of my mind."

He descended two flights of stairs from the fifth floor and was rounding the turn of another flight when he saw Julie Dee. The big man was alone. He wore a pair of gray slacks, a sports shirt, and a look of animal joy.

"I don't have a gun, either," Julie said. "Guns can get you in all kinds of trouble. But you'll remember me, Hawley."

Ralphie's brother climbed a few more steps, his huge hands open and pawing the air with that elaborate appetite for violence displayed by wrestlers on television sets. The difference was that Julie was sincere, and Hawley, watching him, backed carefully away. He thought of kicking Julie in the stomach or the chest, but dared not gamble on having his foot caught by those ready hands. His pride, or his lack of sense, forbade a frantic shout for help. He tightened his fists.

"Just stand still, Hawley. Wait for me."

Julie's tone was pleading. Small puffs of foam had gathered in the corners of his mouth. His eyes were strange with an unvarying light that a sane man couldn't have sustained. Hawley thought: *well, here we go.* In his patched condition he could think of many things that he would rather do. It was then he heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs below. He waited, and Julie waited, for the climbing figure to appear.

"This ain't exactly another comeback," Tommy Cassiano said, "but it's the first fight in a long time that I know I'm gonna win."

Hawley sighed, then sat down on the stairs.

It was certainly nice to have friends.

Because Mrs. Regis lived so close to the church of St. Charles Borromeo, many pious people passed her door on Sunday morning. Hers was the apartment with the azalea plant in the window box, the first floor, left. If you stood on tiptoe and the shades were up, you could look in from the street. Hawley, a bit self-consciously, stood tall as he could, like a llama nibbling dinner from a tree.

He heard a voice behind him and he turned.

"Marge is inside," Mrs. Regis said. "She made the coffee and I stepped over to Schlummer's for the rolls."

"I was just walking by," Hawley said.

"Were you on your way to church?"

"No, I'm going later, Mrs. Regis —the twelve o'clock."

"Come in then. Have a cup of coffee, George."

"No—like I said, I was just walking by."

"Come in," Mrs. Regis said more firmly. "I understand you didn't have much luck when you started out for coffee last night." She stood there, shrewdly watching his face go pale with immediate shame. "Don't you argue with me, George."

The bag of rolls smelled very much like Sunday morning, but Mrs. Regis was not lighthearted in her customary way. She opened the vestibule door and the door to her apartment with the same key.

Hawley followed her to the kitchen, where Marge was spreading a cloth on the small enamel-topped table. She stared at Hawley in silence, and then, as though remembering something, she tried to withdraw her hands.

"Leave your hands on the table, Marge," Mrs. Regis said.

Marge placed them on the rumpled cloth. She remained that way, looking first at Hawley, then to the mother of Joe Regis. Neither hand was adorned with the ring that Joe had given her.

"It's simple enough," Mrs. Regis said. "She loves you, George. I think I've known it for more than a month. She came to me last night as though I had some power to forgive. Forgive what, in Heaven's name—that the two of you are young and alive?"

Hawley couldn't open his mouth to utter a fraction of the tumult that was gathering inside of him.

"Where do you think Joe Regis went when he died—to Coney Island? Are we pagans, the three of us?" The older woman turned her eyes from them. "Joe doesn't need a girl where he is now. He used to say to me, in his serious way, 'She'd probably have more fun with George.'"

Hawley watched her walk to the door that led out to the living room.

"You can bring me a cup of coffee," she said, "—and a little water for my azaleas—whenever you get a chance."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.**

TITLE: ***A Case of Heredity***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALE: Borgville, Michigan

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Young Jeff Fisher had a real problem: he wanted to marry the pretty girl but he was afraid to. Jeff's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all been crooks. Would heredity bust loose in Jeff some day?*

THE MINUTE I SAW THOSE TWO I knew my grandfather would have pawned his false teeth just for a chance to look them over. Grandfather collects faces, you see. Mostly he uses pictures because strange faces don't happen very often in our town, and when they do . . .

But I'd better start back at the beginning, like Mom says I should always.

I was walking back from Schwartz's farm after wasting a whole can of worms on their little old creek without catching anything. These strangers had stopped along the highway south of Borgville, where there's a picnic table under a shade tree. They were standing by the fence looking out across Old Man Wallace's cornfield as if ten acres of stunted corn was something worth seeing.

The girl smiled at me when I came up to them. "Hi, sonny," she said.

When you're fifteen you don't like people calling you sonny, especially strangers, but when she smiled at me and said it I didn't mind. She was a real pretty girl, with dimples in both cheeks and dark hair that was cut short-like around the back. None of the Borgville girls ever wears their hair that way. She had on a pretty flowered dress and one of those big real-leather pocketbooks with a strap

that goes around the shoulder. She looked like some of the girls that pose for pictures in Mom's mail-order catalogues.

"Is the next town Borgville?" she said.

I told her it was.

"I suppose there are Borgs all over the place," she said.

I told her there used to be a lot of them, but now there were only a couple of families left. The man said something, or maybe he just snorted. He had his back to us, and he kept looking at the cornfield.

"We need an umpire," she said. "Will you be our umpire? Just because his father was in jail once, he won't marry me. Don't you think that's silly?"

"He was in jail five times," the man said. "At least five times."

"Phooey," the girl said. "What does that have to do with you?"

The man turned around. He was grinning, but it wasn't a real happy grin. He was a fine-looking fellow, though. He had dark, curly hair, and he was tall and husky, like some of those state police fellows that come through Borgville now and then.

"Ever hear of the Fisher family?" he said.

I kind of gulped, and said, "Charlie Fisher?" The words busted out before I thought what I was saying.

He shrugged, and looked at the girl. "You see? Dad died before he was born, but Borgville never forgets. Probably the mothers are still using dad's name to scare their kids." He pointed across the field, and then I saw what he'd been looking at all that time. "What's that over there?" he said.

"It burned down long, long ago," I told him, "But I've heard that it's the old Fisher place."

"The ancestral home," he said. "Nothing there but some stones, now, but I'll bet the kids still think the place is haunted. Don't you?"

A lot of kids did, but I didn't say anything.

"Who was Charlie Fisher?" the girl asked.

I was too embarrassed to answer, but the man snapped at me, "Say it!"

So I said it. "He was a crook. Everybody knows that."

"There you have it," the man said. "Like father, like son."

"Jeff!" she said. "That isn't so, and you know it." She turned to me. "Don't you think he ought to marry me?"

"I don't know, ma'am," I said. "But my grandfather could tell you."

"Does you grandfather live in Borgville?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am," she said. "It makes me feel old and decrepit. Let's talk to the boy's grandfather, Jeff. You might as well hear about your father first-hand."

They put me and my fish pole in the back seat of their brand-new convertible—I looked, and it only

had 172 miles on it—and they drove me into town. It was a hot afternoon, and I was glad to get out of walking that half mile. But I was even gladder that Grandfather would get a chance to see these people.

He doesn't get much chance to see strange faces these days, because he's past eighty, and he doesn't get around like he used to. Not that he's feeble, or anything like that. It's just that he thinks he's out of the standing-up-and-doing years, and into the sitting-down-and-thinking years.

With Borgville being off the main road, not many strangers come through. When Grandfather can't get the real thing, he mostly looks at pictures in newspapers or magazines or anywhere he can find them. I've seen him spend an hour studying faces in the society pages, and there never was a person so interested in other people's Family Albums. He calls it "character reading," and he'll even watch audience participation shows on TV. He doesn't care much for shows with actors, though. He says you can't learn a thing from an actor's face. Grandfather has wonderful eyesight and he keeps saying he never forgets a face, though we have to take his word for that a lot of times because even if he remembers the faces he forgets the names that go with them.

But he does love to look at faces, and I knew from the way his face lit up when we got out of the car that I was bringing him a real treat.

Grandfather was in his usual place on the bench in front of Jake Palmer's Barber Shop, and Nat Barlow was sitting there with him. We parked right in front of them, and Grandfather was scratching his bald head and fidgeting all over when I led them up to him. He only does that when he's excited.

"Gramps," I said, "these people want to know if they should get married."

Grandfather looked the girl over first, and she smiled and blushed a little. Then he turned to the man.

"It isn't quite as simple as it sounds," the man said. "You see, my name is Fisher."

Grandfather kept looking at him. "There's no law that I know of against a man named Fisher getting married," he said.

"I'm one of the Borgville Fishers," the man said. "They were all crooks, you know. I've been checking up on them."

Grandfather got out his corncob and lit it, and he allowed between puffs that he'd heard about a lot of people looking up their ancestors and bragging about how they landed on Plymouth Rock, or fought at Vicksburg, but he'd never heard of anyone trying to run down the crooks in his family tree.

Nat Barlow had been looking the fellow over, too, and all at once he cut loose and yelled, "Why, you're Charlie Fisher's boy!"

"That's right," the man admitted. "Jeff Fisher is the name."

"I'll be derned," Nat said.

Jake Palmer stuck his head out the door of his barber shop, and looked around. "Did I hear you say that rat Charlie Fisher's come back?"

"Naw," Nat said. "This here's his boy. Jeff Fisher."

"Oh," Jake said. "You're gonna give him a homecoming parade, I suppose. I say if there's a Fisher anywhere in the county, call the sheriff." He ducked out of sight, and banged the door.

Jeff Fisher looked at the girl. "You see," he said.

"Jake's still sore about the five hundred your old man did him out of," Nat said.

"It doesn't make any difference," the girl said to Grandfather. "Tell him it doesn't make any difference. I wouldn't be marrying his family. Besides, they're all dead now. They wouldn't bother us."

The girl sat down on one end of the bench, and Jeff Fisher sat down on the other end, and they told us all about it.

Jeff Fisher said he was an orphan and that he never knew who his parents were. He never cared much, either, until he met this girl and decided to get married, and then he thought he should be fair to her and check up, to be sure there wasn't any insanity, or leakage of the heart, or such things, in his family. He went back to the orphanage and found out that his dad was Charlie Fisher, formerly of Borgville and lastly of the state prison, where he died when Jeff Fisher was only a kid.

He had some detectives investigate, and he found out some other things, too. Like how Charlie Fisher's dad, Joe Fisher, was not exactly an upstanding citizen, even though he was once elected township supervisor in what later turned out to be a vote fraud. And he found out that Charlie's granddad was a convicted horse thief.

All of this had Jeff worried. After all, if his great-granddad and his granddad and his dad were all crooks, he wondered if being a crook just ran in the family, and sooner or later something would bust loose in him and he'd end up behind bars himself. If that was going to happen he certainly couldn't marry the girl.

By this time we had quite a crowd around us. Mrs. Pobloch stopped on her way back from shopping, and old Mr. Gregory had happened by, and Bill Wallace, that runs the Borgville Service Station, and Doc Beyers' wife, and Mr. Hanson, the bank president, and some others I don't remember now.

Grandfather said, "Seems to me I've heard of a lot of fellows turning out decent in spite of what their dads or granddads might have done."

Jeff Fisher shook his head. "I've put myself through college, and I

know a little about psychology. No one is a crook by heredity, but certain tendencies can be inherited, and if there are three generations of crooks in my family those tendencies must be pretty strong. I have a good job—with the Harling Machine Tool Company in Detroit. I keep their books for them, and look after their money, and how do I know when I'll get the urge to walk off with some of it?"

"If you've been all right up to now," Grandfather said, "I don't reckon you've got much to worry about." He looked at the girl. "If I was you, I'd marry him."

"I'm convinced," she said. "*He's* the one that needs selling."

"Aw, marry the girl," Mrs. Pobloch said. "She'll make you a fine wife."

The crowd was getting bigger, and it wouldn't have taken one of these public opinion experts to see that they were pretty much in favor of a quick splicing.

"You ought to get married right here in Borgville," Mrs. Beyers said. "It would kind of be like wiping the slate clean. We'll give you a nice wedding and a good sendoff."

Mr. Hanson was all for calling in Reverend Adams and getting things moving. There was some talk about the license and what could be done about the waiting period, and I was so interested in what was going on that I didn't notice when Grandfather slipped away. The first thing I knew, Mr. Gregory, who runs the Star Restaurant, was sitting in Grandfather's place, and I looked across the street and saw Grandfather coming out of Snubbs' Hardware Store.

He walked off down the street, and I ran and caught up with him. He went up to Doc Beyers' office and borrowed the doctor's Detroit telephone book, and then he walked on down to the Borgville Service Station and got a map of Michigan. The discussion had built up into quite an argument when we got back, with the girl and everyone else pushing the idea of getting on with the honeymoon plans, and Jeff just scowling and shaking his head.

Grandfather nudged his way through the crowd, and Mr. Gregory saw him coming and got up and let him have his seat back. Gramps sat down with the telephone book and the map of Michigan on his lap, and said, "How do you know that this crook Charlie Fisher is the Charlie Fisher that was your dad?"

That gave Jeff a kind of jolt. "You mean there's more than one Charlie Fisher from Borgville?" he said.

"Fisher isn't exactly an uncommon name, you know," Grandfather told him. "Look here, son."

Together they went through the Detroit telephone book counting Charles Fishers and Charles Fischers, and there was a pile of them.

"There," Grandfather said. "How do you know you aren't related to one of these?"

"They told me at the orphanage it was Charles Fisher from Borgville," Jeff said.

"There are lots of towns in Michigan with a 'ville' at the end of them," Grandfather said. "Look here."

He got out the map, and nothing would do but they had to go through the whole list of towns in Michigan, and all those with a "ville" they had to compare with Borgville to see if Jeff Fisher had possibly misunderstood, or if maybe the people at the orphanage had got mixed up. It took some time, and when they'd finished Grandfather folded up the map and said, "How can you be sure they didn't get it wrong?"

Jeff Fisher couldn't be sure, and I could see that Grandfather had made a point.

"And even if it is Borgville," Grandfather said, "it might not be *that* Charlie Fisher. It's a common name around here—I can remember three myself. This Charlie Fisher—the crook, I mean—wasn't a bad boy. He went off to the city, and got to be pretty successful. He was selling stocks, and pretty soon people around here were after him, every time he came back to tell them where to invest their money. He finally gave in and sold them some gold mining stock. Turned out there wasn't any gold, or any mine even, so he went to jail. I can't see what his granddad or his dad could have had to do with that, but I can tell you one thing for sure: you don't look a bit like that Charlie Fisher. There was another Charlie Fisher worked on a farm north of town. If you ask me, I believe you favor him a little."

The girl clapped her hands, and I could see that Jeff Fisher was getting interested. "Can you tell me anything about him?" he said.

"Not a thing," Grandfather said. "Don't know where he came from, or where he went."

Jeff Fisher relaxed a little, and grinned. "Maybe I was making a fuss over nothing. One crook in the family wouldn't have bothered me, but when I found three—and Lord knows how many there might have been before that—I began to get worried. Val's folks are pretty particular, too. They'd raise the devil if they thought she was going to marry a convict's son. And I wouldn't want to make her unhappy."

"I wouldn't give it another thought," Grandfather said. "That crook Charlie Fisher had hair that was as straight as a string. He wouldn't have a curly-haired son like you. Go ahead and marry the girl. It's the right thing to do."

"Thanks," Jeff said. "You know, I think I'll do just that—if she's willing, that is."

The girl came up with a real gooey "Oh, Jeff!" and he kissed her

right there on Main Street with half the town standing around and applauding. There was another motion to send for Reverend Adams, but Jeff Fisher said there really wasn't that much rush about it. The important thing was that they'd made up their minds about it—what he really meant was that he'd made up his mind—thanks to the kind people of Borgville, and he'd be grateful all his life. But he was sure Val's folks would want her to have a real dressed-up wedding in her church at home. Mrs. Beyers said of course, that was the only way to get married, and everyone lined up to shake hands with Jeff Fisher and the girl, and then the two of them walked on down the street hand in hand to take a look at Borgville.

"Aren't they a handsome couple!" Mrs. Pobloch said.

I happened to look at Nat Barlow, and he seemed to disagree. He was glaring at Grandfather, his face red, and he was breathing in little short gasps and looked about to explode.

"Bill Rastin," he said, "you're a dirty liar!"

Grandfather nodded, and sat there watching Jeff Fisher and the girl. "A liar," he said. "But I'm as clean as you are."

"There never was but *one* Fisher family around here," Nat said. "And I never knew anyone to be sorry about that. And as for Charlie Fisher having straight hair . . ."

"I know," Grandfather said. "Charlie was short and fat, and he always looked like a born crook to me. You can be sure he didn't get any of my money. It was different with Charlie's dad, Joe Fisher. Joe was really a good-looking man. And—" he tossed his head "—this young fellow is a dead ringer for his granddad."

"You oughtta be ashamed of yourself," Nat said. "Telling that girl to marry him, and then going through all that monkey business to talk him into marrying her."

Mrs. Beyers leaned over and patted Grandfather on the shoulder. "It was a fine and noble thing to do. And they certainly make a good-looking couple. I'm so happy for them."

Grandfather didn't say anything. Jeff Fisher and the girl had stopped to look at something in the window of Carter's Apparel Shop. Grandfather jumped up and waved in their direction as Sheriff Pilkins zoomed past with a bunch of his deputies. The deputies were out of the car before the sheriff got it stopped, and by the time Jeff Fisher saw what was happening there wasn't anything he could do but turn around with his hands up.

The sheriff searched Fisher and went through the girl's pocketbook, and after he packed the two of them off to the county jail with the deputies, he came walking back up the street toward us. No one said a thing to him all along Main Street,

though I could see that everyone was dying to know what it was about.

He shook Grandfather's hand and slapped him on the back. "Nice going, Bill. I'll let you know about the reward."

"Hang the reward," Grandfather said.

Mrs. Pobloch backed up against the barber shop and started mopping her face with her handkerchief, and Mrs. Beyers was kind of white and sick-looking. She said, "Ed Pilkins, would you mind telling me why you arrested that fine young man and his girl?"

"Quite a few reasons," Sheriff Pilkins said. "They both got records that would fill a book. And here's a pretty good reason right here: twenty-five pay roll checks of the Harling Machine Tool Company, all made out to Jeffrey C. Fisher and each of them for $127.83."

"Why, that's the place he works," Mrs. Beyers said. "What's wrong with him having those checks?"

"Worked," Sheriff Pilkins said. "Worked, not works. And he wasn't exactly a long-standing employee. Matter of fact, he only worked there one night—night before last—and he worked just long enough to steal a bunch of checks and a check-writing machine. He and the girl are a couple of real professionals. That was a darned clever thing to do—come back here where his family lived, and put on that act of theirs. He'd of cashed one of these checks at every business place in town, no questions asked, and been gone before Borgville knew what hit it."

"Then he *was* a crook," Mrs. Beyers said. She turned on Grandfather. "You told the girl to marry him. And you convinced him he should marry her. You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"They been going all over the country together," Grandfather said. "I figured it would be best if he married her—even if he is a crook."

"They're both crooks," Sheriff Pilkins said. "And if it'll make you feel any better, they've been married seven, eight years, though they get married again whenever it helps whatever line they happen to be passing out. Be seeing you, Bill."

He walked away. Nat nudged Grandfather. "You called the sheriff?"

"Yeah," Grandfather said. "I used Snubbs' phone. Ed told me to keep them occupied until he could get here, so I got the phone book and the map and gave them a spiel."

Nat asked, "How'd you know they was crooks?"

"A year or so ago they stole some money orders from a little post office in Wisconsin," Grandfather said. "Their pictures have been up in the Borgville Post Office for the last six months. If you looked at the faces on the bulletin board regular each week, like I do, you'd know what's going on in the world."

How long is it since you have reread MACBETH, *or seen it performed on the stage? Well, here is your chance to refresh yourself, in at least two meanings of the phrase—and with what a difference! For here you will see* MACBETH *as it might have been played in Drury Lane Theatre in 1776, with the great David Garrick enacting the title role, and with no less a personage than Dr. Sam: Johnson in the audience, and no less a chronicler than good old Bozzy at his side in the crimson-hung box. Witness, if you will, "murder most foul"—"murder yet fantastical"—an 18th century backstage puzzle, with extraordinary historical authenticity, for Dr. Sam: Johnson, "detector" and Shakespearean critic, to unravel—and all so rich and meaty that we ask you to read and enjoy slowly . . .*

THE BANQUO TRAP

by LILLIAN DE LA TORRE

(As if written by James Boswell, Esq:, in the year 1776)

WITH MY LEARNED FRIEND, DR. Sam: Johnson, I sat enthralled in the dusky stage box, shivering at the ominous words of the most notorious murderer of all time—Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor—spoken in the thrilling voice of the most famous actor of our era, the renowned David Garrick:

"My thought,
Whose murder yet is but
fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of
man that function
Is smothered in surmise, and
nothing is
But what is not . . ."

On the projecting stage-apron below us, erect in his gold-laced red coat and snowy-powdered tail-wig, his dark eyes sparkling, the great little man held every eye. Scarce a glance was spared for his fellow-general, Banquo, as erect and as little, in like regimentals. Yet Captain Robert Benton well suited the part of a soldier, for he had been an officer of the King's marines, raking it and ruffling it from Quebec to the Havannah, before he brought his small ramrod figure and blank handsome face, his nasal voice and stiff-arm gestures, from regimental theatricals to the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane.

As the two red-coated figures strutted the stage in the glare of a hundred candles, little did we perceive a shadow, the shadow of murder all too real, that dogged them, to snuff out a life, and—but for Dr. Sam: Johnson—to bring the

great actor's farewell season to a premature and disgraceful conclusion.

Well pleased with murder yet fantastical, I rumbled my feet in applause as the two red coats quitted the stage. Then the stage grooves scraped, and the blasted-heath back scene parted and slid off to reveal Macbeth's painted canvas castle. I leaned forward, eager for a first glimpse of the new Lady Macbeth.

On stalked a lanky virago in red and black, shaking three sable feathers in her high powdered wig. I sat back, disgusted. Even the gaudy little page that bore up her gold-encrusted train seemed to wrinkle his snub nose behind her back. She planted herself, opened her mouth, and declaimed. At my side Dr. Johnson snorted through his nose as one false emphasis followed another. But soon Garrick was there to cast his spell again, and once more we sat rapt till the act drop fell.

As the musick struck up, I stole a sideways glance, hoping my companion was not too ill pleased. I had had enough to do to perswade him hither; tempting him, but vainly, with the puffs in the papers:

"At the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, this present Monday, being May 13, 1776, (for the benefit of Mr. *Benton*) will be presented the Tragedy of *Macbeth;* the Principal Characters by Mr. *Garrick*, Mr. *Benton*, and Mrs. *King* (this Night only); the other Parts to the best Advantage. In Act IV, a *Dance of Furies*, the Vocal Parts by Mr. *Bransby* &c.

"To which will be added (by particular Desire) a Pantomime Entertainment call'd *Harlequin Cherokee*, with Alterations and Additions, including two Views of the late Eruption of Mount *Vesuvius;* the Whole to conclude with a grand Representation of the Landing of the *Cherokees* in *America*. Harlequin, Mr. *Wright;* Pantaloon, Sig. *Grimaldi;* Colombine, Miss *LaRue* (from *Quebec*.

☞ "Mr. *Benton* begs to advertize his Patrons, that his Friend from America, the Chief of the *Mohawk* Nation, will honour his Benefit by attending *in Full War Paint & Feathers*."

But the puffs in the papers were nothing to Dr. Sam: Johnson.

"Tschah!" he merely snorted. "What has Macbeth to do with the late eruptions of Vesuvius, or the Chief of the Mohawk Nation with either? Harlequin may conduct his japeries without me!"

In the end, 'twas David Garrick who won him over. The great actor had announced his retirement from the stage. Once more he would play over all his great parts; and then he would play no more. Dr. Johnson loved his fellow-townsman and one-time pupil, little Davy Garrick, whom he scolded and protected with rough affection. When David

desired it, and offered the stage box, Dr. Johnson could not refuse to see him enact once more the Thane of Cawdor.

So now the sturdy philosopher sat planted upon the forward bench in the crimson-hung box, observing and observed. The elegant theatre dazzled the eye. Candles in gilded branches sparkled on new paint and gilt work, jewelled snuff boxes and stock buckles. Fans fluttered in the boxes, and gold-laced shoulders shrugged. On the benches of the pit below, beaux and wits and city merchants were packed together like a box of corks. At the pit front the musick scraped and blared and thumped. From the upper gallery descended raucous laughter and showers of nut shells.

Over all floated the scent of pulvillio and bergamot, the sharp odour of apple cores and candle wax, the stench of wet felt and leather breeches, and the grating cry of the orange lasses:

"Won't ye ha' some oranges? Some orange chips, ladies and gentlemen! Won't ye have a bill o' the play?"

That they plied a lively trade among the gods of the gallery was proved, in the showers of orange peel that pattered down against the proscenium arch, and rained upon the impassive heads of the King's Grenadiers at its base. Red coats, spatterdashes, bandoliers, muskets, bayonets, sugar-loaf helmets and all, there they stood a-spraddle, on guard, to keep the King's peace. Behind the blank, beefy faces no thought stirred, least of all that the King's peace might be breached this very night.

I ran my eye over the crowded house, to salute a friend, ogle a lady of fashion, or stare upon a person of note. In one box I saluted Omiah the South-sea Islander, a picture of graceful coffee-coloured elegance. In another I greeted the Mohawk Chieftain, as good as his word with streaked war paint, feathered top-knot, and war hatchet, all which (for warmth) he wore over his ordinary English suit of clothes. In the pit, Parliament-men and politicians returned my bows with complaisance. As I bent left and right, I gloried to think that I bore a part in this brilliant world of London. It is surely the sum of human felicity.

While my friend and I thus stared about from the vantage point of the stage box, many an eye stared back, for "Dictionary" Johnson and "Corsica" Boswell were at least as eminent, and some might say as picturesque, as any Islander or Indian Chief. The gazers saw a burly large old man in plain chestnut-coloured stuff, his bushy brown wig pushed back on his broad, seamy brow, his marked, classick features composed and strong. Beside him they would behold myself, Mr. Boswell the advocate, swart of hue, long of nose, quite the great man in a suit of sky-blue sattin and

a fashionable wig with high foretop and screwed side curls.

The tinkle of the prompter's bell put a stop to staring and ogling. The gallery gods swallowed the last of their oranges and pelted down the last of the peel, and the curtain rose for Act II.

Enter Banquo, and Fleance bearing a torch before him.

"How goes the night, boy?"

Boy! Fleance was no boy, as any man could plainly see, but a most luscious new little "breeches figure."

"The moon is down; I have not heard the clock."

It was a warm husky voice with an elusive lilt. I envied little Captain Benton as his arm embraced his "son" affectionately. Too soon the brief scene gave way to the sinister doings of murder. Garrick was very great in the scene of the phantom dagger:

"Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings; and wither'd murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost . . ."

Even as he spoke, real murder stalked ever closer.

Though the great actor was supreme in the scene of stage murder that followed, I own I thought it long till I might have another glimpse of Fleance's neat limbs. At last came the scene of the murder of Banquo:

Enter Banquo, and Fleance with a torch.

Third Murderer: "'Tis he."

First Murderer: "Stand to't."

Banquo: "It will be rain tonight."

First Murderer: "Let it come down!"

They set upon Banquo.

Banquo: "O treachery! Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly!"

A long scream raised my fell of hair, and the pretty limbs were gone for good. On the green floorcloth Captain Benton died with conviction, he who had looked on death from Quebec to the Havannah. Another moment, and the drop curtain fell. The musick banged up a lively air, designed to cover the noise of the carpenters as they prepared the stage for the banquet scene to follow.

Fleance's part was played. I meant to make my bow to the lady before some fribbling maccaroni minced in ahead of me. With a hasty bow to my companion, I made for the Green Room passage.

To my surprise, I was stopped short by a third Grenadier. As I stood dumb-founded, I heard a well-known voice:

"You may admit Mr. Boswell."

There stood David Garrick. He

was in the thick of things. Beyond him, from the stage, I heard furniture rumbling into place. Green-coated attendants ran by, carrying gilded goblets, silvered cardboard platters, and painted wooden fowls for the feast. At the first side-scene a gawky candle-snuffer whistled under his breath as he lighted fresh candles in the wing-ladder sconces.

The great actor was engaged at either hand. On the one side his dresser, having enveloped his scarlet and gold gauds in a powdering-sheet, snowed fresh powder from a tube onto his military wig. On the other hand his Lady Macbeth engaged his attention. Yet he broke off to address me with complaisance:

"I don't mean to bar Mr. Boswell. But you must know, sir, I am so harried with comings and goings, with slamming of doors when I play, that I have decreed an end to-night. There's a Grenadier at every door, and no one passes in or out till the play is done.—Stay, be known to Mrs. King, late of York —" The actress curtsied stiffly. "Well, ma'am, as I say, go to your mirror and mend your painting, 'tis fitter for Covent Garden portico."

"You may say so," said the virago sullenly, "who have the finest of Chinese colour boxes; but give me leave to tell you, the Spanish wool in the tiring-room is cheap red lead, both unbecoming and ill for the health—"

"Why, hey, George!" called Garrick hastily as he spied a passing figure. The gentleman came with alacrity—Mr. George Garrick, Davy's brother, man of business, replica, and *alter ego*.

"Here, George, d'ye see, have the goodness to fetch some of my Chinese paper for Mrs. King—and hey, George, d'ye hear, take the lady with you!"

Mr. George Garrick well understood his function. He steered the lady away, still talking loudly. Mr. David Garrick stared after her with distraction on his mobile countenance.

"Being manager of a theatre for twenty years," he said bitterly, "is, I think, as cruel an expiation for any sin, however heinous, as man can devise. A monk in the monastery of LaTrappe is in Paradise, if compared to a manager surrounded by actresses! Actresses! Plague, famine, and pestilence!"

"Why, sir," said I, "I grant you yonder Termagant's a picture of famine; I had liever have seen Mrs. Yates."

"No doubt, sir," shrugged Garrick, "but you must remember, that since this is Mr. Benton's benefit, 'tis his to pay the expence, take the profit, and fill such parts as he chuses, with his particular friends; as, Mrs. King in Lady Macbeth."

"And the new Fleance?"

"The little Colombine from the Colonies? Aye, she don't live up to Mr. Benton's promises; but she's well enough."

"She's very well; I'll e'en go and

pay my compliments to the lady."

"To Miss LaRue? Hey, Boswell, d'ye hear, be wary, Captain Benton has a sudden sword."

"I mean but to compliment the lady's art—"

"Well, well, you may do so; but cut your raptures short, and return by this door as you came, else you'll miss the ghost of Banquo, and," added the great actor slily, "well do I know your curiosity in ghosts and apparitions!"

With a salute, I entered the Green Room. There, against the elegant panelling, the Three Witches were playing at chuck-farthing, grotesque with their old-fashioned peaked hats, red stomachers, and seamy men's faces. Miss LaRue's pretty breaches figure was not to be seen.

Waving my hand at the Witches, I left the Green Room and mounted to the upper dressing-room tier. Miss LaRue's dressing-room breathed of scented pomatum and flower-water, but the lady was not there. As I turned to descend, the glimmer of candle light through an open door beckoned me, and I entered.

Within I found my acquaintance, Captain Benton, seated before his mirror, while his dresser transformed him from Banquo to Banquo's ghost. The dresser, a tall ramrod of a fellow with deep-set eyes, performed his duties with parade-deck precision. While the Captain closed his eyes, his man chalked his face dead white. With a little finger stained with red rose-pink, then with burnt-ivory black, he deftly sketched a gaping wound across the Captain's bared throat. Then standing off with critick's eye, the fellow added a final grewsome touch, a gout of red beside the pallid lip.

"Bravo, Captain Benton!" I applauded. "Small doubt you'll affright the galleries. Don't you affright yourself?"

"I am not accustomed to be affrighted," rejoined the old soldier with his cool, humourless smile. "'Tis as well. Can you credit it, Mr. Boswell, I believe my life's in danger? I grant the stage carpenters are careless dogs—but a machine that misfires, a buttonless foil—such things may happen on any stage, but why always to me?"

"Egad, sir, you must take care."

"Why, so I do. I trust myself to nothing that Murdoch here has not tested first."

"He must be invaluable to you," said I, regarding the silent servitor as he dribbled fresh red paint on the Captain's second wig.

"He is so, sir. I'll never part with Murdoch. We have been together since I saved his life at the Havannah."

"How, sir?" I asked, willing to hear a warlike tale.

"Nay, never mind how. But Murdoch is grateful—hey, Murdoch?—and he rewards me by serving me and making me laugh." The Captain's face, blank with powder, looked little enough risible. "Nay,

I'll tell you a secret. Murdoch has the second sight. When the fit's on him, he may see himself swinging on a gallows at low tide—or me in my blood, eh, Murdoch?—or many another laughable scene—to him who don't believe in such shimble-shambles."

Murdoch, streaking Banquo's coat with fresh red like blood, muttered to himself, a prayer or a spell. I felt a superstitious shiver.

"Don't mutter, my lad," said the Captain, unmoved. "Did you test the Banquo trap?"

"Aye, sir." The man held out the coat, and Captain Benton shrugged into it. "I came early of purpose to test the Banquo trap."

"I have a mind," said I, "to see this famous machine, the Banquo trap."

"Come along, then." Captain Benton led the way. Murdoch took up a powder puff, and followed.

"Bob, a word—" 'Twas Mrs. King who intercepted us at the stair foot. Her face, I noted, was little amended as to paint. Captain Benton raised his brows, but he stopped short.

"By your leave, Mr. Boswell—you had best go before me. Murdoch, stand off. What's your pleasure, ma'am?"

I left the Captain listening blank-faced to the lady's low-voiced harangue, while Murdoch stood off, and pretended not to hear. Down a rearward stair I found my way, and so under the stage planking. The cellarage smelled musty and dusty. A few yellow candles, winking from iron standards affixed to a forest of posts, made small pools of light in the gloom. In a recess by the stair-foot, two absorbed youths were busy with canvas and lath, wire and wood. One was a snub-nosed lad dressed like a stage carpenter in coarse shirt and leather breeches, with his own yellow curls carelessly tied back with a lace. The other was small and richly drest, with cloudy dark hair held back by a broad ribband. I paused to watch their proceedings.

"What do you construct, my lads?"

" 'Twill be a giant for *Harlequin Gulliver,*" said the carpenter youth eagerly, "and Harlequin will fight him. I've constructed a machine through which the giant will cast his spear—"

"A dangerous invention, is it not, a spear flying free?"

"You may say so, sir," struck in a second stage carpenter, a tall man with a face like a rasp, who sat on a bulk and whipped a rope's end. "On the first trial Benny's machine had like to have killed Captain Benton where he stood at the wing—"

"But I've amended that, father," cried the snub-nosed lad, "for now I've so contrived it that by the same machine the spear flies back again."

"I marvel how these miracles may be wrought," said I.

"A trip releases a spring," explained the young projector eagerly.

"the spear flies forth, then with a wave of his magick bat Harlequin pulls a blackened packthread, a counterweight falls, and the spear is pulled back again."

"Do, Benny, shew him the way of it," the smaller lad urged eagerly. 'Twas a warm, husky voice, with a familiar lilt.

"Miss LaRue!" cried Captain Benton's dresser, coming down the stair. "What do you here? The Captain will be angry!"

"And with reason, Marie," said the actor behind him, in his coldest whip-lash voice. "I have expressly forbidden you to lower yourself by consorting with the stage servants. Your passion for the machinery is unwomanly. Retire at once. We shall speak of this later."

The girl, still in her boy's garb as Fleance, went in silence, near tears. The yellow-haired boy scowled, and bunched his fist.

"Benny!" cried the elder carpenter. "Give over your nonsense, for you'll be the death of some'un yet."

"Aye, plague take all pantomimical projectors," seconded a sepulchral voice in the dusky backwards of the cellarage. I started. The speaker was a fearful sight, towering in the gloom with tall turretted head dress. A dull red glow beamed upwards on the hideous frown marking his face. Then I manned myself. 'Twas only an actor garbed for his part as Hecate the witch goddess, with the old-fashioned India-ink wire lines of his frown catching the glow from his short clay pipe as he beguiled the time of waiting. I peered close, and with difficulty recognized good-natured old Bransby.

"Aye," ruminated he in his slow deep voice, "the pantomime will yet be the death of us all. Well do I mind in the '59, when we played *Harlequin Dr. Faustus,* and the ghostly hand with the hammer broke Harlequin's head instead of the brazen one."

"Tedious old fool," said Captain Benton, not quite inaudibly. "Don't mind him, Boswell. That's the cauldron trap, over his head; he'll rise on it presently."

I looked at the place he indicated, a square cut in the stage planking, somehow controlled by ropes that would run along twin upright beams and over a pair of pulleys when the stage carpenters should revolve the drums of a winch below. A similar arrangement controlled the large platform of the "grave trap," and the "Banquo trap," a small square platform off to one side.

The plank platform of the Banquo trap was down, leaving a hole in the stage floor above. On the platform was fixed a stool, ready for the ghost to sit on. The dresser assisted his master to mount, gave his face a last flick of white powder, and stood smartly at attention beside the upright.

All this while, close to our ears, on the pitward side of the adjacent

partition, the entr'acte musick was blaring. Now the prompter's warning bell tinkled. The musick gathered head for a closing burst. The stage carpenters stripped off their shirts. I stared. The older man's back was crossed and scored with the scars of old lashings, of which he now seemed totally oblivious. He laid hold of the capstan bar that worked the winch. I waved my hand at Captain Benton on the trap, fearsome in the dimness with his white face and blood-streaked lip, and ran up the stair.

I re-entered the stage box barely in time for the famous banquet scene in *Macbeth*. The crowded theatre was hushed as the gallery gods held their breath in anticipation of their favourite spectre, the ghost of Banquo.

Not so my friend beside me, the learned editor of Johnson's *Shakespeare,* who held little patience with stage contrivances. In his view, the imagination painted better. He would have perswaded Garrick, if he could, to excuse Captain Benton reappearing, and "look but on a stool." The learned philosopher, therefore, flounced impatiently as the unseen winch, screaking and scraping, heralded the advent of the Banquo trap behind the banquet table. On the instant, above the noise of the machine, a long horrible cry resounded, as of a murdered man *in extremis,* and in another moment the "blood-boultered Banquo" was heaved into view.

Small wonder Macbeth dropped the glass he held. Though I had seen the effect contriving, nevertheless I was shocked. 'Twas a sight to chill the stoutest heart. Gaping and distorted of mouth, spattered with glistening red, contorted as if in his death throe, Captain Benton seemed a corpse indeed. He drew a rattling breath, and spoke; but shockingly, a visible gush of blood seemed to strangle the word in his throat. It sounded like "Murder!"

"Innovation!" muttered Dr. Johnson. If 'twas innovation, I approved it; Captain Benton had made good use, it seemed, of a mouthful of rose-pink. Even as I thus reflected, his hands clutched the air, his mouth bubbled, and his frame contorted, pitched sideways, and disappeared behind the table.

A gasp went over the house. What had happened? Was ramrod-stiff Captain Benton too drunk to stand? Was it some new scheam of stage business?

The scene moved forward, but the ghost of Banquo came not again. Mr. Garrick had perforce to cry to empty air:

"Avaunt, and quit my sight!
Let the earth hide thee!
Thy bones are marrowless, thy
blood is cold,
Thou hast no speculation in
those eyes
Which thou dost glare with!"

"I own it, sir," said I to my friend, "these words, operating on the

mind alone, exceed stage contrivances."

"I trust, sir," said Dr. Johnson uneasily, "that 'tis no more than contrivance."

So great was his unease, that he could not sit still, but lumbered before me towards the side scene as soon as the act drop fell. The Grenadier eyed us suspiciously; but he knew me again, and passed us.

On the stage all was confusion. In their tinselled velvet coats, faces stricken and drawn under the paint, the supernumerary actors stood behind the banquet table in a knot. Mrs. King sat on her throne, her face in her hands, weeping in great gulps.

Behind the table Captain Benton lay in his blood where he had fallen. He was quite dead.

I stared in unbelief. A sharp-edged blade had unseamed him from nave to chaps. We had heard his death cry. Who had struck him down?

'Twas David Garrick who spoke the question at my friend's elbow. His dark eyes were full of real tears.

"Indeed, sir, all hangs upon an immediate detection," cried Mr. George Garrick at the other elbow. "If you, sir, cannot quickly unriddle the matter, we shall all be taken up for breaching the King's peace, and Davy will lose the King's patent for playing, and end his career in disgrace."

"I will do what I can," said Dr. Johnson. "But you on the stage saw more than I. Who sat next the trap?"

Fingers pointed at two actors, little mild-faced Aickin and young Fawcett.

"But you cannot think, sir," said the younger man sharply, "that any of us laid a hand on him. We sat all along the table, in full sight of one another, and every man with his glass in his hand. Two thousand people saw us so."

"But you heard his outcry?" demanded Dr. Johnson.

"Who could fail to hear? It rings still in my ears."

"And you saw him as the trap rose?"

"No, sir. 'Twas not our part to see the ghost, but to look upon Macbeth."

"And you, Davy, what did you see?"

"Why, Dr. Johnson, as I thought, I saw Captain Benton exceeding his part with spewing of red paint, and falling from his stool like one disguised in liquor, and I resolved inwardly to rebuke him, poor fellow! Only when the act drop fell, and we made to raise him, did we find him to be slain."

"I see it all clearly!" cried I. "This murderer lay hid beneath the table, and sliced him as he rose on the trap!"

"Not so, Mr. Boswell," said little Aickin. " 'Twas our first care to search beneath the table, where we found neither a murderer nor the knife that did the deed."

"Look to the table for the knife!"

But all the banquet knives were edgeless things of tin. Dr. Johnson shook his head.

"We must call in the magistrate," said he.

"Anything but that!" cried Mr. George Garrick. " 'Twould ruin us all. We must first have the murderer to hand over."

"Alack, Mr. George," said Dr. Johnson, "I fear the murderer has struck his blow and taken his flight where we shall never catch up with him."

"Not so, sir," cried Mr. David Garrick, "because of the King's Grenadiers!"

When Dr. Johnson understood the system of sentries, the men were questioned. None, they averred, had been permitted to depart; none, indeed, had sought egress, save only a stage servant or two intent on filling some actor's empty can.

"Well, then," said Dr. Johnson, "the guilty villain is penned up close, and shall not escape."

But among the throng of actors, aye and actresses, singers, dancers, stage carpenters, and servants — which one was guilty?

As we stood deliberating, the wise actor-manager cocked an ear. All was not well 'tother side of the drop curtain. At the long delay the audience was growing restive. In the gallery, sticks thundered, catcalls whined, voices demanded Harlequin. 'Twas the sound of a riot in the making.

"We must make haste!" cried David Garrick.

Swiftly the mangled form was conveyed to the inner stage alcove. The back-shutters closed upon the grim sight, the three Witches took their places, the prompter's bell tinkled, the act drop rose, and up stage, center, standing upon the cauldron trap, terrible Hecate the witch goddess—mild-mannered old Bransby in real life—rose out of the earth. In his sepulchral voice he spoke the incantation. Weird musick sounded. Somewhere over our heads in the flies an unearthly voice was singing: "Come away! Come away!"

"Hark, I am called; my little spirit, see,
Sits in a foggy cloud and stays for me!"

The foggy cloud, of painted canvas affixed to a board, now swung majestically down. Mr. Bransby stepped aboard, and was levitated from our sight.

"Gothick folderol!" muttered Dr. Johnson.

A new pair of back-shutters came together, and certain "walking gentlemen" stepped forth to engage in discourse:

"And the right valiant Banquo walked too late,
Whom you may say, if't please you, Fleance killed . . ."

Dr. Johnson ignored any clew that might lurk in the words of the Bard. Drawing me aside, he desired me to narrate the full Odyssey

of my backstage wanderings before the banquet scene. Then, like the wise Odysseus, he made for the lower regions.

"Falsely does the poet say," he remarked, feeling his way down the uneasy stair, *"Facilis descensus Averni,* for easy it is not; but," he added at the stair-foot, "black as the Pit it certainly is!"

The two carpenters had extinguished all but a single candle. In the gloom they sat upon a bulk and puffed on their churchwarden pipes. Dr. Johnson saluted them gruffly.

"You two were below for Banquo's ghost?"

"Aye, sir, 'tis our post."

"And who else?"

"Him in sky-blue satin—" (pointing his pipe stem at me) "Mr. Bransby—Captain Benton—the Captain's girl and his man."

"Then, Mr. Boswell, I desire you'll fetch the actor, the actress, and the servant; and advert no one of anything."

On the word, part of my errand was forestalled, as Mr. Bransby, ducking his turretted head under a low beam, appeared at the stair-foot. Leaving silence behind me, I departed to discharge the rest of my commission.

I found the servant in the Captain's dressing-room, making good use of his time. An empty ale can was at his elbow. Before him stood the little Colombine from the Colonies, no longer attired as a boy, but garbed in a stiff gauzy dancing skirt that was cut short to reveal a dainty slippered foot and a white silk ankle. In his hand he cupped her lifted chin, while he smoothed rose-pink on the pale round of her delicate cheek.

The fellow looked little pleased at my summons, but followed as I handed the lady down to the cellarage. As we passed the stage, the walking gentlemen had talked themselves out, and the musick was sounding the third entr'acte.

In the cellarage, to five oddly assorted figures clustered in the pool of candle light, Dr. Sam: Johnson spoke abruptly:

"Captain Benton is dead. He died on the Banquo trap. Which one of you killed him?"

Five faces went blank with surprise. Then tears seemed to touch the girl's dark eyes, philosophical regret the Hecate mask, grief the servant's gaunt mouth. The elder stage carpenter spoke sturdily:

"Indeed not I, sir, nor my son neither. I'll answer for Benny. We heard the Captain cry out, but we don't regard what the actors halloo, 'tis none of our affair. Nor did we see aught, by reason the trap was risen above our heads. We never touched him, sir, Mr. Murdoch is our witness."

"And you'll say the same for me, Ned Maggs," said the Captain's dresser sombrely. "I stood by and saw him go up, as I always did. Then I mounted to the dressing-room, to have all in readiness when

his part was done." (And paint Miss LaRue for Colombine, I added silently; but said nothing.) "I heard him give voice, but like Ned I gave no heed. He called me, and I failed him. I'll never forgive myself."

"Tell me, good fellow, had your master enemies?"

"What man has not, sir, that loves the ladies and huffs the gentlemen?"

"Say what ladies he loved? Miss LaRue here, perhaps?" Dr. Johnson shot the girl a keen glance; but he spoke gently. "Was he your lover, my dear?"

"No, sir," whispered the girl. "He was my mother's lover long ago in Quebec; and thus, my father."

"Marie!" cried the carpenter lad. "Why did you never tell me? I thought—"

"Look alive, Benny," cut in the old man, as an overhead wire jerked and a bell tinkled under the joists. Hastily the two carpenters moved to the lowered Banquo trap.

"Ready, Mr. Bransby?"

Old Bransby stood still.

"There's blood on the Banquo trap," said he. "By your leave, I'll ride the grave trap up."

"I cannot take down the grave trap," said old Maggs. "Can't you hear them footing on it? You must ride the Banquo trap or walk."

"I'll walk." Bransby hiked up his flapping robes and took the stairs two at a time; and not a moment too soon, for the prompter's bell was jerking frantically. Through the trap-opening we heard the iron thunder balls rolling in the thunder trunk, and sniffed the stench of the rosin lightning-flash. Then Bransby's deep voice spoke above our heads, and the witches' chorus rang out:

"Black spirits and white,
Red spirits and grey,
Mingle, mingle, mingle,
You that mingle may!"

Feet pattered in the mazes of the Furies' Dance. Suddenly a shoe skidded at the gaping edge of the trap, and a muttered curse was heard.

"Put up the Banquo trap, fellow!" commanded Dr. Johnson sharply. "If Captain Benton met his end neither above nor below, let us see what the trap will shew us half way between."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The platform began to rise. It had reached the half way point when there was a click, and forth from under the stage planking, like a snake striking, leaped a hideous device. Fixed to a pole was a long knife blade, ground to a double edge and a stabbing point. In the shadow of the trap, oblivious, the two carpenters strained at the capstan until the rising trap jammed against the pole and would rise no more.

"So now we know," said Dr. Johnson slowly, "how Banquo became a ghost between earth and heaven. But who reset the device?"

"Nobody reset it," said old Maggs

hoarsely, "for Benny and me was manning the winch, and Mr. Bransby and Mr. Murdoch stood by, and not one of us climbed up."

Dr. Johnson's retentive mind reverted to my account of my pantomimical researches.

"Look for a strand of packthread!" he cried.

Sure enough the packthread was there, hanging in the shadow of the upright. At sight of it, Benny caught Marie by the hand.

"'Tis my machine! It works!" cried he. "Marie, it works!"

"Benny! You!" Old Maggs collared his son. Realization returned to the eager young face.

"I never!" cried Benny. "Somebody stole it! But it does work," he added, with the stubborn pride of a projector. He pulled the packthread, a hidden counterpoise fell, and the blade shot back. "It works, my fortune's made!"

It worked too well. We all saw how the sharp-bladed spear had been mounted in the shadow of a rafter, and so triggered that at proper height the rising trap would trip it and release the deadly blade. Whatever the knife penetrated in its forward leap must be ripped along its length as the powerful winch sent the trap inexorably upward. A man who sat upon a stool that was bolted in place—

"Why is the stool bolted down?"

The elder carpenter licked his lip.

"By Captain Benton's order. You may see the chalk marks on the trap as Mr. Murdoch explained it to us."

"Well, Dr. Johnson," said I, inspirited, "be that as it may, now that we know how 'twas done, you may soon put your finger on the doer."

"Why, sir, how am I to tell which hand of many stole the device—if stolen it was—sharpened the knife, and set the trap? Or for whom, or when? It may have been set for weeks."

"No, sir," said I, "for the trap was tested to-night, as Murdoch informed his master in my hearing. So the villain is in the theatre to-night; and the only hope for Mr. Garrick's patent is to lay him by the heels before he gets away."

"Alack, sir," said my friend ruefully, "this is a task for Harlequin's magick bat, or some conjurer from a bottle."

"Which would surely avail, sir," said I, smiling, "were this a Persian Tale."

"A Persian Tale?" said my friend slowly. "Perhaps, sir, if ratiocination can supply the place of magick, I may make it a Persian Tale. So soon as the company can be assembled, I shall make shift to detect the villain!"

'Twas a strange enough court of justice that met on the lighted stage when the pantomime was done. Behind the Vesuvius-painted cloth, unseen, Captain Benton lay dead. Over our heads swung Hecate's

cloudy car, trailing ropes. At stage center stood my burly friend in his sober brown, flanked by the two Garricks, and I at his shoulder. About us clustered a motley assemblage. The brilliant glare from the wing-ladders fell on Cherokee scalp-locks and Mrs. King's sable plumes, on Colombine's gauzes and the stage carpenter's leather breeches, on Mr. Bransby's India-ink scowl and Signor Grimaldi's painted grin, on stage servants in green coats and dressers in shirt sleeves stained with rose-pink. At each side the two Grenadier Guards from the fore-stage stood a-spraddle, at the ready.

"Pray make haste, Dr. Johnson," implored David Garrick, still in his gold-laced scarlet coat. "The bells of St.-Mary-le-Strand have gone ten, and my patent hangs in the balance."

"Before the bells chime eleven, the detection shall be accomplished. Attend me. There may be more than one among you who may have wished Captain Benton dead—" Dr. Johnson ran his eyes sternly from face to face. "—a gentleman huffed, a mistress supplanted, a servant misused, a sailor flogged—" Old Maggs looked up, startled, then hastily dropped his gaze. "—a pair of lovers baulked—" The carpenter and his Colombine locked hands. "I say there may be many such, that would not be sorry if a knife jumped out to destroy Captain Benton. But only one person set the knife ready to strike. Happily we have no need to guess at that person, for Nature, at the behest of the Almighty, will infallibly detect the man of blood."

"What do you mean, sir?"

For answer, Dr. Johnson gave a sign. Green-coats bestirred themselves, the drop Vesuvius rose, and the inmost back-shutters parted. At the sight of the pallid corpse, stained with rose-pink and his own clotted blood, the actors gasped. They drew back, shuddering, as couch and corpse together were borne forward into the full central glare.

"Look upon the dead!" cried Dr. Johnson in his solemn, sonorous voice. "Step forward, those of you who dare, and touch him!"

"To what end, sir?" asked Mr. Garrick with a shiver.

"To the end that the guilty villain may be revealed; for 'tis well known, that at the murderer's touch, his victim bleeds afresh."

"Surely, sir," remarked old Bransby, "this is mere Gothick superstition?"

"Superstition? No, sir, 'tis ascertained fact, and will hold in any court of law in this realm."

"I muse," said I, "why it should be so?"

"The learned Libavius sets forth, sir, in *De Cruentatione Cadaverum,* that the secret disorder of the malefactor's vital humours, though never so well concealed, will operate—whether by radiation, evaporation, or antipathy—to set the blood of his

victim flowing. Cornelius Gemma holds rather, that 'tis the ghost of the dead man lingering for revenge; and from what we know of revenants and spirits, this may well be true—"

"It will have blood, they say;
blood will have blood:
Augurs and understood relations have brought forth
The secretest man of blood . . ."

I heard with a shudder the ominous words of Macbeth as, half to himself, David Garrick repeated them. My eyes went to the shadows edging the pool of light in which we stood, half-expecting to see the ghost of Banquo stalking there, glaring with sightless eyes; and truth to tell, many an eye followed mine.

"Stand forth, and touch!" repeated Dr. Johnson. "And first, since this deed was contrived below stage, let those below stand forth. Miss LaRue! Mr. Bransby! Murdoch! Benny! Maggs!"

"And with due respect, sir," said old Maggs quietly—was there an insolent gleam in his eye?—"Mr. Boswell."

"Mr. Boswell will shew us the way," assented my friend calmly.

My sensibilities were hurt, but I stood forth. The ghost of the murdered man seemed very near. Exerting my utmost command, though my flesh crawled, I touched the chilling cheek. Nothing happened.

"Pass, Mr. Boswell."

Miss LaRue tightened her grip on the young carpenter's hand. Her light touch on the chalk-white cheek was a caress. Unbidden the young carpenter touched after her.

"Pass, my young friends. Mr. Bransby?"

The tall actor held his large hand theatrically high:

"I am innocent, before the Eternal I swear it" He took the stiffening hand in his: "Farewell! The rest is silence!"

"Well played, sir!" said Dr. Johnson drily. "Maggs?"

"I don't hold with such hocus-pocus, sir," muttered the grater-face man stubbornly.

"Did you kill him, fellow?"

"No, sir, not I."

"Then touch, or stand accused."

The old carpenter shrugged, and touched. Again nothing happened.

"And you, Murdoch, touch."

The man with the second sight rolled his deep eyes wildly.

"Touch his brow—here—" My friend's hand swept back the disordered wig from the dead man's forehead, and Murdoch put a shaking hand to the pallid flesh.

I started. Did I see a trickle of liquid blood glisten at the dead man's temple? In another instant the trickle became a crimson stream, that ripped upon the floor. In the dead silence we heard the red drops fall.

The man Murdoch snatched away his hand. The palm shewed red. His eyes darted left and right, seeking egress, and found none. Sud-

denly he made a mightly leap, caught at a dangling rope, swarmed over Hecate's chariot, and so up into the flies.

"There's your man, Davy," said Dr. Johnson.

"You'll never catch Murdoch," said old Maggs, looking up, "for at the Havannah he was the smartest fore-topman in the fleet—until Captain Benton fastened on him. I never knew what it was he knew about Murdoch, but it was worth his life, I knew that. The Captain was always talking about Execution Dock—a great jest, he thought it."

"You might have told us, when murder was done."

"Me split on an old shipmate?"

"Thanky, Ned," said a sardonic voice from the heavens.

"And besides, I owed Captain Benton a trifle myself."

"Perhaps you helped?"

"Nobody helped," said the voice from above, "so now come and get me—if you can!"

The actors scattered. Benny drew his Marie gently to shelter. The King's Grenadiers moved in. A couple of red-coated heroes rode precariously in pursuit, levitated on Hecate's cloud. Our quarry swung higher, into the dead dark of the upper flies. As we stared upward, momentarily baffled, suddenly a heavy counterpoise plummetted to the planking, narrowly missing a third red-coat. From the upward regions a savage laugh resounded. Cursing, the red-coat up with his musket and fired point-blank at the sound. Fate winged his ball. Down through the gunpowder reek the murderer plunged, and lay still at the foot of his master's bier.

As we passed under Temple Bar on our homeward way, I spoke with exultation:

"I must note this evening's work in my journal, for confirmation of the strange and oft-doubted fact, that at the murderer's touch the dead man bleeds."

JOHNSON: "Pray, Mr. Boswell, clear your mind of superstition. You were all *hummed*. The dead man did not bleed, no more than any actor in a stage battle, when he claps to his face a sponge of red paint which he has previously fastened in his palm."

BOSWELL: "Yet I saw the murderer's palm red with blood."

JOHNSON: "No, sir, with rose-pink, from painting faces. Well, well, 'twas enough, that when I squeezed my sponge, the murderer saw the red stream flow, and his conscience drove him to flight. The wicked flee when no man pursueth."

BOSWELL: "Pray, how were you so certain of Murdoch, sir?"

JOHNSON: "Nay, sir, what is certainty? Of Bow-Street, Tyburn-gallows certainty there was some little dearth. Had I been certain, would I have put the others to so horrid a test, as to touch the cold corpse?"

BOSWELL: "Yet you were certain

enough, to put Murdoch alone to the test of blood that seemed to flow."

JOHNSON: "That is so, sir; I had Murdoch in my eye, for he alone, as the death trap rose, stood by, ready to retract the deadly blade as soon as its work was done."

BOSWELL: "I muse why he risked retracting it."

JOHNSON: "Because, sir, if the trap jammed, immediate detection would ensue, before he could make good his escape. He did not then know the doors were all guarded, and escape impossible. When he was turned back with his empty ale can, he must have been in terrour, having heard the dying man, grown wise too late, denouncing him by name."

BOSWELL: "Surely the Captain cried 'Murder!' "

JOHNSON: "No, sir, 'Murdoch!' The man himself said it: 'He called me, and I failed him.' "

BOSWELL: "What drove the fellow to so bloody a deed?"

JOHNSON: "The Captain's blind folly, holding him in fear, ever taunting him with Execution Dock, where so many pirates hang in chains."

BOSWELL: "Nay, sir, how much jeopardy attaches to so old a crime?"

JOHNSON: "None, sir. You know it. I know it. But did Murdoch know it, when every day the Captain assured him otherwise?"

BOSWELL: "Then 'twas Murdoch who unbuttoned the foil and misfired the machine?"

JOHNSON: "It might be so; but I think rather that 'twas such fortuitous mishaps, failing, that gave him hope of freedom and set him contriving a death trap that should not fail. So he ordered the stool affixed; he came early to test—or tamper with—the Banquo trap; he saw his wicked work succeed—"

BOSWELL: "And save for Dr. Sam: Johnson, he must have escaped scot-free. But your little 'tragedy of blood' did the fellow's business. After your strictures upon players, I scarce thought to see you turn play-actor yourself; but 'twas a comedy well thought on."

JOHNSON: "You may say so, Bozzy, having thought on it."

BOSWELL: "I, sir?"

JOHNSON: "Yes, you, sir, naming the Persian Tales; of which my favourite has ever been, that of the groom who enjoyed the Sultana."

BOSWELL: "What of him, sir?"

JOHNSON: "When the suspected grooms were paraded and a test proposed, he alone shirked it, and thus, like Murdoch, was detected by his own fears. By this we may see," he concluded sententiously, "that the man of letters can always overcome the gross fellow by the ampler furnishing of his mind!"

As we turned into Bolt Court under a starlit sky, the bells of St. Clement Danes chimed the hour, and the giants of St. Dunstan's pealed in reply. "Eleven of the clock," sang out the watch in Fleet Street, "and all's we-e-ell!"

This is the fourth story your Editors purchased in the Short Story Workshop which one-half of Ellery Queen conducted at the University of Texas during the Fall-Winter semester of 1958-59 (for full details, and three stories by undergraduates, see pages 68-78 in our February 1959 issue — copies still available if you order promptly.)

Mr. Kelly's story was written for English 367K, a creative writing course for graduate students and for Austin, Texas townspeople seriously interested in becoming professional writers. This story was the direct result of a class assignment in which, as an experiment, all students were asked to develop a story from the hints and implications in the following sentence: "Detective Lieutenant Blake had searched the old lady's bedroom thoroughly — he was an expert at it — but had failed to find the single sheet of paper which he was positive was there."

Judge for yourself how ingeniously and satisfyingly Mr. Kelly met the challenges and, equally important, avoided the deceptively simple pitfalls in the springboard sentence.

A SCRAP OF PAPER

by JAMES J. KELLY

DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT BLAKE was on his way to commit and discover a murder. To lend weight to the authenticity of his discovery, he carried with him a small box of cheap chocolates — gift-wrapped. It established a sort of alibi in advance. A small detail perhaps, but it would contribute to the over-all effect on Patrolman Adams, who would testify for him if the need arose. Blake glanced at Adams who was casually wheeling the patrol car through the early morning traffic of Capital City.

"Young and alert," thought Blake, "and on his way to his first murder. I don't even remember my first murder—murder case, that is. I am now on my way to my first murder, too." Calmly, he considered his plan. It was simple and direct; the timing was easy; the result—"person or persons unknown." His record could stand an unsolved crime.

There was no curb or sidewalk in front of the old two-story frame house and Adams kicked up dust as he slid the car into the narrow driveway.

"Only be a minute," Blake said, stepping into the cloud of dust. He brushed the sleeve of his old sports

coat absent-mindedly. Carrying the chocolates, he climbed the porch steps and pulled open the old screen door. The hinges resisted. He had to lift the sprung door over the groove worn into the boards of the porch.

In the two months since Blake had found the old woman, Adams had driven him to this broken-down excuse of a house at least once a week. Each time Blake had opened the front door, the squeal of the hinges and the grating of wood on wood had set his nerves on edge and established the off-key mood of the meeting. Today he refused to be annoyed. His mind reached out to the small room at the top of the stairs.

The lower floor was dark and empty. As he had expected, there was no one at home—no one but the old woman. Hadn't he arranged it that way? He climbed the stairs slowly, oblivious to the squeaking of the treads.

As he also expected, he found her sitting by the table at the foot of the bed. He closed the door and a quick glance around the room told him that the only window was closed and that the bathroom was empty.

He tossed the chocolates on the bed and stood over her. She didn't rise but her hand paused in the writing and she looked at him, waiting to hear his voice. There was no fear in her eyes, only tired resignation in the movement that brushed back an untidy strand of hair.

"I found her. She's married." He said it in a flat, toneless voice.

"I knew it," she whispered.

He advanced one step. His voice was low, hard with resolute control. "She's gone from me forever and you—did it—to me."

She did not smile her victory and this made his revenge the more imperative.

He took the gloves from his pocket and pulled them taut. "You'll die for it," he said and stepped into the bathroom. It took only a few seconds and he had the towel. She was rising from the table when he stopped in the doorway, towel stretched tight in his hands.

He was momentarily surprised at the vigor of her resistance. She clawed at his face and chest. Then he had the towel around her neck and was pulling viciously. She struggled a few moments longer—and it was over.

As her body slid to the floor he took a huge breath and reasserted control over himself. Timing was now the important part of his plan. He lifted the body to the bed and pulled the thin bathrobe from her shoulders. He pushed up the window and fought open the rusted catch on the screen. The screen swung loose. The cold draft blew over the body, a necessary step in reducing the body temperature quickly.

He pulled off his gloves and went

to examine his face in the bathroom mirror. No scratches were visible. As he put his gloves away, he noticed the right-hand pocket of his jacket had been torn in the struggle. A minor accident, easily remedied. One more quick look around and he was finished. Then a wrong detail jarred his trained eye and he stepped to the small table.

The writing pad and a cheap ballpoint pen lay on the table. A corner of the top sheet was torn away. He held the pad up to an angle of the light. The indentations under the torn-off corner shadowed and he read, *Blake murdered me,* and her clear signature.

The original message was there somewhere, but he didn't have much time to search. He dropped quickly to his knees and looked under the bed. Nothing. The table. Nothing. A hurried glance at the unopened box of chocolates. Undisturbed. She had had only a few moments. Where was that torn corner?

He caught hold of himself. No more time now to look. He folded the writing pad into his jacket pocket, banged down the stairs, and slammed the old door open.

Adams, sprawled under the wheel of the patrol car, was listening to the police radio.

"She's dead," Blake said, "Look around back. It just happened." Adams ran down the driveway to the rear of the house. Blake barked the emergency signal into the radio. In less than a minute he had reported the crime and an ambulance was on the way. He asked permission to take charge and got immediate approval from his superior, Captain Snyder. Then he ran back up the stairs to the room.

He closed the door behind him and jumped to the open window. The loose screen swung away as he pushed it out. The roof of the lower story sloped toward a backyard cluttered with weeds and garbage cans. At that moment Adams came around the far corner of the building. Blake signaled to him.

"Nobody, Lieutenant," Adams called up to the window.

"Keep watch out front. I'll check around up here," Blake told him.

A few minutes was all he had—probably all he needed to find that damning piece of paper. He surveyed the room. Start with the table. No, the pad. He pulled it from his pocket. It was the work of only a moment to riffle through the pages. The bottom corner of the top sheet was torn off in a roughly rectangular piece about two by three inches in size. An easy size to fold and hide. But it had to be somewhere easily discovered. She had beaten him before and now she was dead. She must not win again. The stake before had been his happiness; now it was his life.

The small piece of paper had to be very near. He stepped to the bed, tight-lipped. In a moment he had proved that she had not put the

paper in her mouth. He made a quick search of the body and the bed. Not there.

The scream of the ambulance, still faint, was a pressure on him. He forced himself to go slow, to be thorough. The table yielded nothing. He went to his knees. Nothing above or below. He searched under the bed, this time carefully.

The siren suddenly filled the room and died to a groan. He picked up the box of chocolates and the faded bathrobe and put them on the table. Then with a last look at the body he opened the door.

It was from this vantage point that he watched the police procedure. He stood with his back to the jamb, eyes alert to every movement in the room. The men worked with a precision that evidenced long training. The doctor with stethoscope and experienced fingers, the ambulance driver readying the stretcher, the fingerprint men and the photographer—all were trained in their own specialties. From his favorable position at the door, Blake watched the men work. At any moment one of them would see the small piece of paper. Every sense was alert in his anxiety for self-preservation. He would have to deal with the discovery quickly.

But it did not come. The men finished and moved out. The doctor and ambulance driver encased the body in a plastic sack and carried it from bed to stretcher. It wasn't until they were gone that Blake stepped away from the door.

Downstairs, Blake spoke to Adams as the ambulance pulled away.

"I'll be right back," Blake said. "I want to talk to the family downstairs. And get this. Stick by those stairs. I've locked the screen and window. No one gets into that room—get it, no one!"

Adams responded to the snap of authority in Blake's voice. "Yes, sir." Blake nodded, satisfied that his orders would be followed to the letter.

It was late afternoon when Blake returned to the old frame house. He had accomplished very little, yet he was dog-tired. He had stopped at his apartment for a change of clothes and another thorough examination of the writing pad. Then he had dropped the jacket off at his neighborhood dry cleaners to have the pocket repaired. Then, after an anticipated argument, he had convinced the County Medical Officer of the need for an immediate autopsy. The autopsy proved that the old woman hadn't eaten the paper, and there was no note in the plastic sack. Blake had foreseen both these facts and they proved what he knew must be true: the crucial piece of paper was still in that room.

Adams was on duty at the foot of the stairs. He jumped to his feet as Blake entered. "The family is having dinner downstairs, Lieutenant."

"Okay, I'll get back to them later." Blake looked up the stairwell. "Anyone get into the room?"

"Not while I was on." Adams thanked him for remembering to send a relief. "And Korszki wouldn't let anyone up. You know that."

"Yeah," Blake said, on his way up the stairs.

He closed the door behind him. The room was dim, so he snapped on the light. He was standing where he had stood earlier that day. Nothing had changed except that the body was gone and there was a shallow depression in the bed. He visualized the problem slowly and carefully.

The paper had to be here in the room. She had written it and hidden it in the few seconds it had taken him to grab a towel from the bathroom rack.

The logical place was to start with the table where she had been sitting. The cheap ballpoint pen? Too obvious, he thought, as he unscrewed the cap. He was right—it was not there.

The floor was bare—uncarpeted boards ran the length of the room. He kneeled and began to search. In a few minutes he rose. The tongue and groove of the floor construction prevented any paper from being pushed through it.

The walls came next—with the same result. The single window had been closed until he himself had opened it, so he knew the piece of paper had not been thrown outside. She had not come into the bathroom because he had stood in the way, and she had not reached the door to the stairs.

For the first time that day Blake felt his composure weakening. He wanted to tear the room to pieces, to give in to his increasing sense of frustration and futility. But another part of him intervened: don't let her beat you now; it's only a slip of paper; it exists—find it!

He sat at the table and forced the thoughts to come slowly, rationally.

The only things that had left the room were the body and the few pitiful night clothes she had been wearing. Oh, yes, one other thing—the writing pad itself, but he himself had carried the pad out with him, and the torn corner was definitely not in the pad.

The paper existed—yet it didn't exist.

He realized then that she had won, and that the thought of the scrap of paper would stay with him forever.

At that moment the door opened and Adams stepped into the room. His Police Special was in his hand. Behind him, Captain Snyder paused in the gloom of the stairwell. "Lieutenant Blake, you are under arrest on the charge of murder."

He stepped into the room and held up Blake's torn jacket. From the outside breast pocket he drew a small rectangle of writing paper.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S *Mystery Magazine*

May 1959 Releases

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recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

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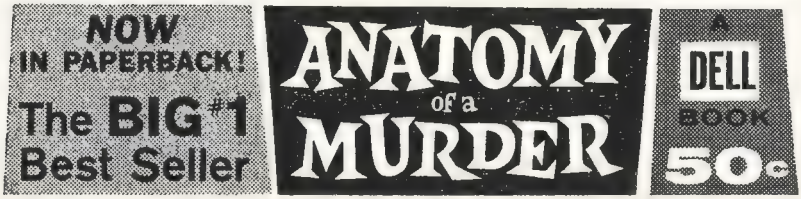

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**ELLERY QUEEN**
TITLE:	***The Hollow Dragon***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Ellery Queen
LOCALE:	Westchester County, New York
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Why should anyone steal a hollow doorstop, 6 by 6 by 12 inches, made of valueless soapstone—even though five of its sides were decorated with bas-reliefs of dragons?*

MISS MERRIVEL ALWAYS SAID THAT the Lord took care of everything, and she affirmed it now with undiminished faith, although she was careful to add in her vigorous contralto that it didn't hurt to help Him out if you could.

"And can you?" asked Mr. Ellery Queen a trifle rebelliously, for he was a notorious heretic, besides having been excavated from his bed without ceremony by Djuna to lend ear to Miss Merrivel's curiously inexplicable tale. Morpheus still beckoned plaintively, and if this robust and bountiful young woman—she was as healthy-looking and overflowing as a cornucopia—had come only to preach, Ellery firmly intended to send her about her business and return to bed.

"Can I?" echoed Miss Merrivel grimly. "*Can* I!" and she took off her hat. Aside from a certain rakish improbability in the hat's design, which looked like a soup plate, Ellery could see nothing remarkable in it.

"Look at this!" She lowered her head, and for a horrified instant Ellery thought she was praying. But then her long brisk fingers came up and parted the reddish hair about her left temple, and he saw a lump beneath the titian strands that was the shape and size

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of a pigeon's egg and the color of spoiled meat.

"How on earth," he cried, sitting up straight, "did you acquire *that?*"

Miss Merrivel winced stoically as she patted her hair down and replaced the soup plate. "I don't know."

"You don't know!"

"It's not so bad now," said Miss Merrivel. "The headache's almost gone. Cold applications and pressure . . . you know the technique? I sat up half the night trying to bring the swelling down. You should have seen it at one o'clock this morning! It looked as if someone had put a bicycle pump in my mouth and forgotten to stop pumping."

Ellery scratched his chin. "There's no error, I trust? I'm—er—not a physician, you know . . ."

"What I need," snapped Miss Merrivel, "is a detective."

"But how in mercy's name—"

The broad shoulders under the tweeds shrugged. "It's not important, Mr. Queen. I mean my being struck on the head. I'm a brawny wench, as you can see, and I haven't been a trained nurse for six years without gathering a choice assortment of scratches and bruises on my lily-white body. I once had a patient who took the greatest delight in kicking my shins." She sighed. "It's something else, you see. Something—funny."

A little silence swept over the Queens' living room, and Ellery was annoyed to feel his skin crawling. There was something in the depths of Miss Merrivel's voice that suggested a hollow moaning out of a catacomb.

"Funny?" he repeated, reaching for the solace of his cigarette case.

"Queer. Prickly. You feel it in that house. I'm not a nervous woman, Mr. Queen, but I declare if I weren't ashamed of myself I'd have quit my job weeks ago." Looking into her calm eyes, Ellery fancied it would go hard with any ordinary ghost who had the temerity to mix with her.

"You're not taking this circuitous method of informing me," he said lightly, "that the house in which you're currently employed is haunted?"

"Haunted! I don't believe in that nonsense, Mr. Queen. Besides, who ever heard of a ghost raising bumps on people's heads?"

"An excellent point."

"It's something different," continued Miss Merrivel thoughtfully. "I can't quite describe it. It's just as if something were going to happen, and you waited and waited without knowing where it would strike—or, for that matter, what it would be."

"Apparently the uncertainty has been removed," remarked Ellery dryly, glancing at the soup plate. "Or do you mean that what you anticipated *wasn't* an assault on yourself?"

"But, Mr. Queen, no one has assaulted me!"

"I beg your pardon?" Ellery said in a feeble voice.

"I mean to say I *was* assaulted, but I'm sure not intentionally. I just happened to get in the way."

"Of what?" asked Ellery, closing his eyes.

"I don't know. That's the horrible part of it."

Ellery pressed his fingers to his temples. "Now, now, Miss Merrivel, suppose we organize? I confess to a vast bewilderment. Just why are you here? Has a crime been committed—"

"Well, you see," said Miss Merrivel, "Mr. Kagiwa is such an odd little man, so helpless and everything. I do feel sorry for the poor old creature. And when they stole that fiendish little doorstop of his with the tangled-up animal on it . . . Well, it was enough to make anyone suspicious, don't you think?" And she paused to dab her lips with a handkerchief that smelled robustly of disinfectant, smiling triumphantly as she did so, as if her extraordinary speech explained everything.

Ellery puffed four times on his cigarette before trusting himself to speak. "Did I understand you to say *doorstop?*"

"Certainly. You know, one of those thingamabobs you put on the floor to keep a door open."

"Yes, yes. Stolen, you say?"

"Well, it's gone. And it was there before they hit me on the head last night—I saw it myself, right by the study door, as innocent as you please. Nobody ever paid any attention to it, and—"

"Incredible," sighed Ellery. "A doorstop. Pretty taste in petty larceny, I must say! Er—animal? You mentioned something about its being 'tangled up'?"

"Snaky sort of monster. They're all over the house. Dragons, I suppose you'd call them. Although *I've* never heard of anyone actually seeing them, except in delirium tremens."

"I begin," said Ellery with a reflective nod, "to see. This old gentleman, Kagiwa—I take it he's your present patient?"

"That's right," said Miss Merrivel brightly. "A chronic renal case. Dr. Sutter of Polyclinic took out one of Mr. Kagiwa's kidneys a couple of months ago, and the poor man is just convalescing. He's quite old, you see, and it's a marvel he's alive to tell the tale. Surgery was risky, but Dr. Sutter—"

"Spare the technical details, Miss Merrivel. I believe I understand. Of course, your convalescent is Japanese?"

"Yes. My first."

"You say that," remarked Ellery with a chuckle, "like a young female after her initial venture into maternity . . . Well, Miss Merrivel, your Japanese and your stolen doorstop and that bump on your charming noodle interest me hugely. If you'll be kind enough to wait, I'll throw some clothes on and go a-

questing with you. And on the way you can tell me all about it in something like orderly sequence."

In Ellery's ugly but voracious Duesenberg, Miss Merrivel watched the city miles devoured, and plunged into her narrative. She had been recommended by Dr. Sutter to nurse Mr. Jito Kagiwa, the aged Japanese gentleman, back to health on his Westchester estate. From the moment she had set foot in the house—which from Miss Merrivel's description was a lovely old non-Nipponese place that rambled over several acres at the rear and projected on stone piles into the waters of the Sound—she had been oppressed by the most annoying and tantalizing feeling of anxiety. She could not put her fingers on the source. It might have come from the manner in which the outwardly Colonial house was furnished: inside it was like an Oriental museum, she said, full of queer alien furniture and pottery and exotic pictures.

"It even smells foreign," she explained. "That sticky-sweet smell . . ."

Ellery listened intently. "We seem up to our ears in intangibles, Miss Merrivel. Or perhaps it's merely incense?"

Miss Merrivel did not know. She was slightly psychic, she explained; that might account for her sensitivity to impressions. Then again, it might have been merely the *people*. Although the Lord Himself knew, they were nice enough on the surface—all but Letitia Gallant. Mr. Kagiwa was an extremely wealthy importer of Oriental curios; he had lived in the United States for over forty years and was quite Americanized. So much so that he had actually married an American divorcee who had subsequently died, bequeathing her Oriental widower a host of fragment memories, a big blond footballish son, and a vinegary and hard-bitten spinster sister. Bill, Mr. Kagiwa's stepson, who retained his dead mother's maiden name of Gallant, was very fond of his ancient little Oriental stepfather and for the past several years, according to Miss Merrivel, had practically run the old Japanese's business for him.

As for Letitia Gallant, Bill's aunt, she made life miserable for everyone, openly bewailing the cruel fate which had thrown her on "the tender mercies of the heathen," as she expressed it, and treating her gentle benefactor with a contempt and sharp-tongued scorn which, said Miss Merrivel with a snap of her strong teeth, were "little short of scandalous."

"Heathen," said Ellery thoughtfully, sliding the Duesenberg into the Pelham highway. "Perhaps that's it, Miss Merrivel. Alien atmospheres generally affect us disagreeably . . . By the way, was this doorstop valuable?" The theft of that commonplace object was nibbling away at his brain cells.

"Oh, no. Just a few dollars—I once heard Mr. Kagiwa say so." And Miss Merrivel brushed the doorstop aside and sailed into the more dramatic portion of her story.

On the previous night she had tucked her aged charge into his bed upstairs at the rear of the house, waited until he fell asleep, and then —her duties for the day over—had gone downstairs to the library, which adjoined the old gentleman's study, for a quiet hour of reading. She recalled how hushed the house had been and how loudly the little Japanese clock had ticked away on the mantel over the fireplace. She had been busy with her patient since after dinner and had no idea where the other members of the household were; she supposed they were sleeping, for it was past eleven o'clock.

"It was so cozy in there," she said in a troubled voice. "And so still. I had the lamp over my left shoulder and was reading *White Woman* —all about a beautiful young nurse who went on a case and fell in love with the secretary of . . . well, I was reading it," she went on quickly, "and the house began to get creepy. Simply—creepy. It shouldn't have, from the book. It's an awfully nice book, Mr. Queen. And the clock went ticking away, and I could hear the water splashing against the piles down at the rear of the house, and suddenly I began to shiver. I don't know why. I felt cold all over. I looked around, but there was nothing; the door to the study was open but it was pitch-dark in there. I—I think I got to feeling a little silly. Me hearing things!"

"Just what do you think you heard?" asked Ellery patiently.

"I really don't know. I can't describe it. A slithery sound, like a—a—" She hesitated, and then burst out, "Oh, I know you'll laugh, Mr. Queen, but it was like a *snake!*"

Ellery did not laugh. Dragons danced on the road. Then he sighed and said, "Or like a dragon, if you can imagine what a dragon would sound like. By the way, have you ever heard sounds like that over the radio? An aspirin dropped into a glass of water becomes a beautiful girl diving into the sea. Powerful thing, the imagination . . . And where did this remarkable sound come from?"

"From Mr. Kagiwa's study. From the dark." Miss Merrivel's pink skin was paler now, and her eyes were impervious to sane analogies. "I was annoyed with myself for making up things in my head and I got out of the chair to investigate. And—and the door of the study suddenly swung shut!"

"Oh," said Ellery in a vastly different tone. "And despite everything you opened the door and investigated?"

"It was silly of me," breathed Miss Merrivel. "Foolhardy, really. There was danger there. But I've always been a fool and I did open the door, and the moment I opened it

and gawped like an idiot into the darkness something hit me on the head. I really saw stars, Mr. Queen." She laughed, but it was a mirthless sort of laugh, and her eyes looked sidewise at him, as if for comfort.

"Nevertheless," murmured Ellery, "that was very brave, Miss Merrivel. And then?" They had swung into the Post Road and were now heading north.

"I was unconscious for about an hour. When I came to I was still lying on the threshold, half in the library, half in the study. The study was still dark. Nothing had changed . . . I put the light on in the study and looked around. It seemed the same, you know. All except the doorstop; that was gone, and I knew then why the door had swung shut so suddenly. Funny, isn't it?"

"Then you haven't told anyone about last night?"

"Well, no." She peered through the windshield with puckered concentration. "I didn't know that I should. If there's anyone in that house who's—who's homicidally inclined, let him think I don't know about it. Matter of fact, I don't." Ellery said nothing. "They all looked the same to me this morning," continued Miss Merrivel. "It's my morning off, you see, and I was able to come to town without exciting comment. Not that anyone would care! It's all very silly, isn't it, Mr. Queen?"

"Precisely why it interests me. We turn here, I believe?" Ellery asked.

Two things struck Ellery as a maid with frightened eyes opened the front door for them and ushered them into a lofty reception hall. One was that this house was not like other houses in his experience, and the other that there was something queerly wrong in it. The first impression arose from the boldly Oriental character of the furnishings—a lush rug on the floor, brilliant and soft with the vivid technique of the East, a mother-of-pearl inlaid teak table, an overhead lamp that was a miniature pagoda, silk hangings embroidered with colored dragons . . . The second troubled him. Perhaps it arose from the pallor of the maid, or the penetrating aroma. A sticky-sweet odor, even as Miss Merrivel had described it, hung heavily in the air, cloying his senses and instantly making him wish for the open air.

"Miss Merrivel!" cried a man's voice, and Ellery turned quickly to find a tall young man with thin cheeks and intelligent eyes advancing on them from a doorway which led, from what he could see beyond it, to the library Miss Merrivel had mentioned. He turned back to the young woman and was astonished to see that her cheeks were crimson.

"Good morning, Mr. Cooper," she said with a catch of her breath. "I want you to meet Mr. Ellery Queen, a friend of mine. I happened to run into him—" They had

cooked up a story between them to account for Ellery's visit, but it was destined never to be served.

"Yes, yes," said the young man excitedly, scarcely glancing at Ellery. He pounced on Miss Merrivel, seizing her hands; and her cheeks burned even more brightly. "Merry, where on earth is old Jito?"

"Mr. Kagiwa? Why, isn't he upstairs in his—"

"No, he isn't. He's gone!"

"Gone?" gasped the nurse, sinking into a chair. "Why, I put him to bed myself last night! When I looked into his room this morning, before I left the house, he was still sleeping."

"No, he wasn't. You only thought he was. He'd rigged up a crude dummy of sorts and covered it with the bedclothes." Cooper paced up and down, worrying his fingernails. "I simply don't understand it."

"I beg your pardon," said Ellery mildly. "I have some experience in these matters." The tall young man stopped short. "I understand that your Mr. Kagiwa is an old man. He may have crossed the line. It's conceivable that he's playing a senile prank on all of you."

"Lord, no! He's keen as a whippet. And the Japanese don't indulge in childish tomfoolery. There's something up—no question about it, Mr. Queen . . . Queen!" Cooper stared at Ellery with suspicion. "I've heard that name before—"

"Mr. Queen," said Miss Merrivel, "is a detective."

"Of course! I remember now. You mean you—" The young man became very still as he looked at Miss Merrivel. Under his steady inspection she grew red again. "Merry, you know something!"

"The merest trifle," murmured Ellery, "just skimpy enough to whet my curiosity. Were you aware, Mr. Cooper, that Mr. Kagiwa's doorstop is missing?"

"Doorstop . . . Oh, you mean that monstrosity he keeps in his study. It can't be. I saw it myself only last night—"

"Oh, it is!" wailed Miss Merrivel. "And—and somebody hit me over the head, Mr. C-Cooper, and t-took it . . ."

The young man paled. "Why, Merry. I mean—that's perfectly barbarous! Are you hurt?"

"Oh, Mr. Cooper . . ."

"Now, now," said Ellery sternly, "let's not get maudlin. Mr. Cooper, just what factor do you represent in this bizarre equation? Miss Merrivel neglected to mention your name in her statement of the problem."

Miss Merrivel blushed again, and this time Ellery looked at her sharply. It occurred to him suddenly that Miss Merrivel had been reading a romance in which the beautiful young nurse fell in love with the secretary of her patient.

"I'm old Jito's secretary," said Cooper abstractedly. "Look here, old man. What has that confounded doorstop to do with Kagiwa's disappearance?"

"That," said Ellery, "is what I propose to find out. By the way, is anything else missing?"

"I don't know what business it is of yours, young man," snapped a female from the library doorway, "but, praise be! the heathen is gone, bag and baggage, and good riddance, I say. I always said that slinky yellow devil would come to no good."

"Stow it, Aunt Letty, for heaven's sake," said a man behind her, and she swept her long skirts aside with a sniff that had something Airedaleish about it. Bill Gallant was a giant with a red face and bloodshot eyes. He looked as if he had not slept and his clothes were rumpled. His aunt in the flesh was all that Miss Merrivel had characterized her, and more. Thin to the point of emaciation, she seemed composed of whalebone, tough rubber, and acid —a tall she-devil of fifty, with slightly mad eyes. Ellery fully expected to find that her tongue was forked; but she shut her lips tightly and, with a cunning perversity, persisted in keeping quiet thenceforward and glaring at him with an intensity that made him uncomfortable.

"Baggage?" he said, after he had introduced himself and they had gone to the library.

"Well, his suitcase is gone," said Gallant hoarsely, "and his clothes are missing—not all, but several suits and plenty of haberdashery. I've questioned all the servants and no one saw him leave the house. We've searched every nook and cranny in the house and every foot of the grounds. He's just vanished into thin air . . . Lord, what a mess! He must have gone crazy."

"Ducked out during the night?" Cooper passed his hand over his hair. "But he isn't crazy, Mr. Gallant—you know that. If he's gone, there was a thumping good reason for his going."

"Have you looked for a note?" asked Ellery, glancing about. The heavy odor had followed them into the library and it bathed the Oriental furnishings with a peculiar fittingness. The door to what he assumed was the missing Japanese's study was closed, and he crossed the room and opened it. There was another door in the study; apparently it led to an extension of the main hall. Miss Merrivel's assailant of the night before had probably entered the study through that door. But why had he stolen the doorstop?

"Of course, we have," said Gallant; they had followed Ellery into the study and were watching him with puzzled absorption. "But there isn't any. He's left without a word."

Ellery was kneeling on the thick Oriental rug a few feet behind the library door, scrutinizing a rectangular depression in the nap. Something heavy, about six inches wide and a foot long, had rested on that spot for a long time; the nap was crushed to a uniform flatness. The missing doorstop, obviously. He

rose and perched himself on the arm of a huge mahogany chair, carved tortuously in a lotus and dragon motif.

"Don't you think," suggested Miss Merrivel, "that we ought to telephone the police?"

"No hurry," said Ellery with a cheerful wave of his hand. "Let's sit down and talk things over. There's nothing criminal in a man's quitting his own castle without explanation—even, Miss Gallant, a heathen. I'm not even sure anything's wrong. The little yellow people are a subtle race with thought processes worlds removed from ours. This business of the pilfered doorstop, however, is provocative. Will someone please describe it to me?"

Bill Gallant hunched his thick shoulders and growled, "Now, look here, Queen, you're evading the issue." He looked worried and haggard, as if a secret maggot were nibbling at him. "This is certainly a matter for old Jito's attorney, if not for the police. I must call—"

"You must follow the dictates of your own conscience, of course," said Ellery, "but if you will take my advice someone will describe the doorstop for me."

"I can tell you exactly," said young Cooper, brushing his thin hair back again with his white, musician's fingers, "because I've handled the thing a number of times and, in fact, signed the express receipt when it was delivered. It's six inches wide, six inches high, and an even foot long. Perfectly regular in shape, you see, except for the decorative bas-reliefs—the dragons. Typical conventionalized Japanese craftsmanship, by the way. Nothing really remarkable."

"Heathen idolatry," said Miss Letitia; her ophidian eyes glowed with a fanatical fire. "Devil!"

Ellery glanced at her. Then he said, "Miss Merrivel has told me that the doorstop isn't valuable." Cooper and Gallant nodded. "What's its composition?"

"Natural soapstone," said Gallant. "You know, that smooth and slippery mineral that's used so much in the Orient—steatite, technically. It's a talc. Jito imports dozens of articles made out of it."

"Oh, this doorstop was something from his curio establishment?"

"No. It was sent to the old man four or five months ago as a gift by some friend traveling in Japan."

"A white man?" asked Ellery suddenly.

They all looked blank. Then Cooper said with an uneasy smile, "I don't believe Mr. Kagiwa ever mentioned his name, or said anything about him, Mr. Queen."

"I see," said Ellery, and he smoked for a moment in silence. "Sent by express?" Cooper nodded. "You're a man of method, Mr. Cooper?"

The secretary looked surprised. "I beg your pardon?"

"Secretaries have a habit of saving

things. May I see that express receipt, please? Evidence is always better than testimony, as any lawyer will tell you. The receipt may provide us with a clue—the sender's name . . ."

"Oh," said Cooper. "So that's your notion? I'm sorry, Mr. Queen. There was no sender's name on the receipt. I remember very clearly."

Ellery looked pained. When he spoke again it was with abruptness, as if he had decided to take a plunge. "How many dragons are there on this doorstop, Mr. Cooper?"

"Five," said Cooper. "The bottom face, of course, is blank."

"Pity it isn't seven," said Ellery without smiling. "The mystic number." And he rose and took a turn about the room, smoking and frowning in the sweet heavy air at the coils of a golden monster embroidered on a silk wall-hanging. Miss Merrivel shivered suddenly and moved closer to the tall thin-faced young man. "Tell me," continued Ellery, turning on his heel and squinting at them, "is your little Jito Kagiwa a Christian?"

Only Miss Letitia was not startled; that woman would have outstared Beelzebub himself. "Lord preserve us!" she cried in a shrill voice. "That devil?"

"Now why," asked Ellery patiently, "do you persist in calling your brother-in-law a devil, Miss Gallant?"

She set her metallic lips and glared. Miss Merrivel said in a warm tone, "He is not. He's a nice kind old gentleman. He may not be a Christian, Mr. Queen, but he isn't a heathen, either. He doesn't believe in anything like that. He's often said so."

"Then he certainly isn't a heathen, strictly speaking," murmured Ellery. "A heathen, you know, is a person belonging to a nation or race neither Christian, Jewish, nor Mohammedan who has not abandoned the original creed of his people."

Miss Letitia looked baffled. But then she shrilled triumphantly, "He is too! I've often heard him talk of some outlandish belief called—called . . ."

"Shinto," muttered Cooper. "It's not true, Merry, that Mr. Kagiwa doesn't believe in anything. He believes in the essential goodness of mankind, in each man's conscience being his best guide. That's the moral essence of Shinto, isn't it, Mr. Queen?"

"Is it?" murmured Ellery in an absent way. "I suppose so. Most interesting. He wasn't a cultist? Shinto is rather primitive, you know."

"Idolater," said Miss Letitia, like a phonograph needle caught in one groove.

They looked uneasily about them. On the study desk there was a fat-bellied little idol of shiny black obsidian. In a corner stood a squat and powerful suit of Samurai armor. The silk of the dragon rippled a little on the wall under the push of

the breeze coming in through the open window.

"He didn't belong to some ancient secret Japanese society?" persisted Ellery. "Has he had much correspondence from the East? Has he received slant-eyed visitors? Did he seem afraid of anything?"

His voice died away, and the dragon stirred again wickedly, and the Samurai looked on with his sightless, enigmatic invisible face. The sickly-sweet odor seemed to grow stronger. They looked at Ellery mutely and helplessly.

"And was this doorstop solid soapstone?" murmured Ellery, gazing out the window at the heaving Sound. Everything heaved and swayed; the house itself seemed afloat in an endless ocean, bobbing to the breathing of the sea. He waited for their reply, but none came. Big Bill Gallant shuffled his feet; he looked even more worried than before. "It couldn't have been, you know," continued Ellery thoughtfully, answering his own question.

"What makes you say that, Mr. Queen?" asked Miss Merrivel.

"Common sense. The piece being valueless, why was it stolen last night? For sentimental reasons? The only one for whom it might have possessed such an attachment is Mr. Kagiwa, and I scarcely think he would have struck you over the head, Miss Merrivel, to retrieve his own property." Aunt and nephew looked startled. "Oh, you didn't know that, of course. Yes, we had a case of simple but painful assault here last night. Gave Miss Merrivel quite a headache. . . . Did the doorstop possess an esoteric meaning? Was it a symbol of something, a sign, a portent, a *warning*?" Again the breeze stirred the dragon, and they shuddered.

"It—" began Cooper. Then he licked his dry lips and said, "This is the twentieth century, Mr. Queen."

"So it is," said Ellery, nodding, "wherefore we shall confine ourselves to sane and demonstrable matters. The practical alternative is that, since the doorstop *was* taken, it was valuable to the taker. But not, obviously, for itself alone. Deduction: it *contained* something valuable. That's why I said it couldn't have been a solid chunk of soapstone."

"That's the most—" said Gallant; his shoulders hunched, and he stared at Ellery in a fascinated way.

"I beg your pardon?" said Ellery softly.

"Nothing. I was just thinking—"

"That I had shot straight to the mark, Mr. Gallant?"

The big young man dropped his gaze and flushed; he began to pace up and down with his hands loosely behind his back, the worried expression more evident than ever. Miss Merrivel bit her lip and sank into the nearest chair. Cooper looked restive, and Letitia Gallant's stiff clothing made little rustling sounds,

like furtive animals in underbrush at night.

Then Gallant stopped pacing and said in a rush, "I suppose I may as well come out with it. Yes, you guessed it, Queen." Ellery looked pained. "The doorstop isn't solid. There's a hollow space inside."

"And what did it contain, Mr. Gallant?"

"A hundred thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills."

It is proverbial that money works miracles. In Jito Kagiwa's study it lived up to its reputation.

The dragon died. The Samurai became an empty shell of crumbling leather and metal. The house ceased rocking and stood firmly on its foundation. The very air freshened and crept into its normal niche. Money talked in familiar accents and before the logic of its speech the specter of dread, creeping things vanished in a snuffed instant. They sighed with relief in unison and their eyes cleared. There had been mere money in the doorstop! Miss Merrivel giggled a little.

"A hundred thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills," nodded Mr. Ellery Queen. "That's an indecent number of hundred-dollar bills, Mr. Gallant. Elucidate."

Bill Gallant elucidated rapidly, his expression vastly comforted, as if a great weight had been lifted from his mind. Old Kagiwa's business, there was no concealing it any longer, was on the verge of bankruptcy. Before the China "incident" a year or so before, it would still have been possible to retrench and lie low, weathering the economic storm. But against his stepson's advice old Kagiwa, with the serene, silent, and unconquerable will of his race, had refused to alter his lifelong business policies. Only when ruin stared him in the eyes did his resolution waver, and then it was too late to do more than salvage the battered wreck.

"He did it on the q.t.," said Gallant, "and the first I knew about it was the other day when he called me into this room, locked the door, picked up the doorstop—he'd left it on the floor all the time! . . . unscrewed one of the dragons . . . came out like a plug. He told me he'd found the secret cavity in the doorstop by accident right after he received it. Nothing in it, he said, and went into some long-winded explanation about the probable origin of the piece. It hadn't been a doorstop originally, of course—didn't suppose the Japanese have such things. Well . . . There was the money, in a tight wad, which he'd stowed away in the hole. I told him he was a fool to leave it lying around that way, but he said no one knew except him and me. Naturally—" He flushed.

"I see now," said Ellery, "why you were reluctant to tell about it. It looks bad for you, obviously."

The big young man spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I

didn't steal the damned thing, but who'd believe me?"

"There's one thing in your favor," murmured Ellery. "Or at least I suppose there is. Are you his heir?"

Gallant looked up wildly. "Yes!"

"Yes, he is," said Cooper in a slow, almost reluctant, voice. "I witnessed the old man's will myself."

"Then much ado about nothing. You wouldn't steal what belongs to you anyway. Buck up, Mr. Gallant, you're safe enough." Ellery sighed and began to button his coat. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, my interest in the case is, I fear, dissipated. I had foreseen something *outré* . . ." He smiled and picked up his hat. "This is a matter for the police, after all. Of course, I'll help if I can, but it's been my experience that local officers prefer to work alone. And really, there's nothing more that I can do."

"But what do you think happened?" asked Miss Merrivel. "Do you think poor Mr. Kagiwa—"

"I'm not a psychologist, Miss Merrivel. Even a psychologist, as a matter of fact, might be baffled by the inner workings of an Oriental's mind. Your policeman doesn't worry about such subtle matters, and I don't doubt the local men will clear this business up in short order. Good day."

Miss Letitia sniffed and swept by Ellery with a disdainful swish of her skirts. Miss Merrivel wearily followed, tugging at her hat. Cooper went to the telephone and Gallant frowned out of the window at the Sound.

"Headquarters?" said Cooper, clearing his throat. "I want to speak to the Chief of Police."

A little of the old heavy-scented, alien silence crept back as they waited.

"One moment," said Ellery from the doorway. "One moment, please." The men turned, surprised. Ellery was smiling apologetically. "I've just thought of something. The human mind is a fearful thing. I've been criminally negligent, gentlemen. There's still another possibility."

"Hold the wire, hold the wire," said Cooper. "Possibility?"

Ellery waved an airy hand. "I may be wrong," he admitted, "but can either of you gentlemen supply me with an almanac?"

"Almanac?" repeated Gallant, bewildered. "Why, certainly. I don't —there's one on the library table, Queen. Here, I'll get it for you." He disappeared into the adjoining room and returned a moment later with a fat paper-backed volume.

Ellery seized it and riffled pages, humming. Cooper and Gallant exchanged glances; then Cooper shrugged and hung up.

"Ah," said Ellery. "Well, well. Mind over matter. The pen is mightier . . . I may be wrong," he said quietly, closing the book and taking off his coat, "but the odds are now superbly against it. Useful things, almanacs . . . Mr. Cooper,"

he said in a new voice, "let me see that express receipt."

The metallic quality of the tone brought them both up, stiffening. "Look here," the secretary growled, "are you insinuating that I've lied to you?"

"The receipt, Mr. Cooper, please."

Bill Gallant said uneasily, "Of course, Cooper. Do as Mr. Queen says. But I don't see what possible value there can be . . ."

"Value is in the mind, Mr. Gallant."

Cooper glared, but he pulled open a drawer of the carved desk and began to rummage about. Finally he came up with a sheaf of motley papers and went through them until he found a small yellow slip.

"Here," he said, scowling. "Damned impertinence, *I* think."

"It's not a question," said Ellery gently, "of what *you* think, Mr. Cooper." He picked up the slip and scanned the yellow paper with the scrupulosity of an archeologist. It was an ordinary express receipt, describing the contents of the package delivered, the date, the sending point, and similar information. The name of the sender was missing. The package had been shipped in a Nippon Yusen Kaisha steamer from Yokohama, Japan, had been picked up in San Francisco by the express company, and forwarded to its consignee, Jito Kagiwa, at his Westchester address. Shipping and express charges had been prepaid in Yokohama on the basis of the 44-pound weight of the doorstop, which was sketchily described as being of soapstone, 6 by 6 by 12 inches in dimensions, and decorated with dragons in bas-relief.

"Well," said Cooper, "I suppose that mess of statistics means something to you."

"This mess of statistics," said Ellery gravely, pocketing the receipt, "means everything to me. Pity if it had been lost. It's like the Rosetta Stone—it's the key to an otherwise mystifying set of facts." His gray eyes were watchful. "The old adage was wrong. It isn't safety that you find in numbers, but enlightenment."

Gallant threw up his hands. "You're talking gibberish, Queen."

"I'm talking sense." Ellery stopped smiling. "You gentlemen are excused. By all means the Chief of Police must be called—but it's I who'll call him and, if you don't mind . . . alone."

"I was not to be cheated of my tidbit of *bizarrerie,*" announced Ellery that evening, "after all." He was perched on the edge of the study desk, and his hand played with the belly of the obsidian image.

Cooper, Miss Merrivel, the two Gallants stared at him. They were all in the last stages of nervousness. The house was rocking again, and the dragon quivered in all his coils in the wind coming through the open window; and the Samurai had

magically taken watchful life unto himself once more. The sky through the window was dark and dappled with blacker clouds; the moon had not yet slipped from under the hem of the sea.

Ellery had departed from the Kagiwa mansion after his telephone conversation with the Chief of Police, to be seen no more until evening. When he had returned, there were men with him. These men, quiet and solid creatures, had not come into the house. No one had approached the Gallants, the secretary, the nurse, the servants. Instead the deputation had disappeared, swallowed up by the darkness.

Ellery said, " 'What a world were this, how unendurable its weight, if they whom Death had sundered did not meet again.' A moving thought. And very apt on this occasion. We shall meet Death tonight, my friends; and even more strangely, the weight shall be lifted. As Southey predicted."

They gaped, utterly bewildered. From the night outside there were clankings and swishings, and occasionally the far shout of a man.

Ellery lit a cigarette. "I find," he said, inhaling deeply, "that once more I have been in error. I demonstrated to you this morning that the most likely reason for the theft of the doorstop was that it was stolen for its contents. I was wrong. It was not stolen for its contents. It was never intended that the belly of the dragon should be ravished."

"But the hundred thousand dollars—" began Miss Merrivel.

"Mr. Queen," cried Bill Gallant, "what's going on here? What are those policemen doing outside? You owe us—"

"Logic," murmured Ellery, "has a way of being slippery. Quite like soapstone, Mr. Gallant. It eluded my fingers today. I pointed out that the doorstop could *not* have been stolen for itself. I was wrong again. It could have been stolen for itself in one contingency. There was one value possible to the doorstop beyond its worth in dollars and cents, or in a sentiment attached to it, or in its significance as a symbol. And that was—*its utility*."

"Utility?" gasped Cooper. "You mean somebody stole it to use as a doorstop?"

"That's absurd, of course. But there is still another possible utility, Mr. Cooper. What are the characteristics of this piece of carved stone which might be made use of? Well, what are its chief points physically? Its substance and weight. It is stone, and it weighs 44 pounds."

Gallant made a queer brushing-aside gesture with one hand, rose as if under compulsion, and went to the window. The others wavered, then they too rose and went to the window, pressing eagerly, their pent-up fears and curiosity urging them on.

The moon was rising now. The scene below was blue-black and

sharp, a miniature etching in motion. A large rowboat was anchored a few yards from the rear of the Kagiwa house. There were men in it, and apparatus. Someone was leaning overside, gazing intently into the water. The surface suddenly quickened into concentric life, becoming agitated. A man's dripping head appeared, open mouth sucking in air. And then, half nude, he climbed into the boat and said something, and the apparatus creaked, and a rope emerged from the blue-black water and began to wind about a small winch.

"But why," came Ellery's voice from behind them, "should an object be stolen because it is stone and weighs 44 pounds? Regarded in this light, the view became brilliantly clear. A man was mysteriously and inexplicably missing—a sick, defenseless, wealthy old man. A heavy stone was missing. And there was the sea at his back door. Put one, two, and three together and you have—"

Someone shouted hoarsely from the boat. In the full moon a dripping mass emerged from the water at the end of the rope. As it was pulled into the boat the silver light revealed it as a mass made up of three parts. One was a suitcase. Another was a rectangular chunk of stone with carvings on it. And the third was the stiff naked body of a little old man with yellow skin and slanted eyes.

"And you have," continued Ellery, slipping from the edge of the desk and poking the muzzle of an automatic into the small of Bill Gallant's back, "the murderer of Jito Kagiwa!"

The shouts of the triumphant fishers made meaningless sound in the old Japanese's study, and Bill Gallant without turning or moving a muscle said in a dead voice, "You damned devil. How did you know?"

"I knew," said Ellery, holding the automatic quite still, "because I knew that the doorstop had no hollow at all, that it was a piece of *solid* stone."

"You couldn't have known that! You never saw it. You were guessing. Besides, you said—"

"That's the second time you have accused me of guessing," said Ellery in an aggrieved tone. "I assure you, Mr. Gallant, that I did nothing of the sort. But knowing that the doorstop was solid, I knew that you had lied when you said that you had seen with your own eyes Kagiwa's withdrawal of the dragon 'plug,' that you had seen the 'cavity' and the 'money' in it. And so I asked myself *why* you had lied. And I saw that it could only have been because you had something to conceal and were sure the doorstop would never be found to give you the lie."

The waters were stilling under the moon.

"But to be sure that the doorstop

would never be found, you had to know where the doorstop was. To know where it was, you had to be the person who had disposed of it after striking Miss Merrivel over the head and stealing it from this room, unconsciously making that slithery, dragonish sound in the process which was merely the scuffing of your shoes in the thick pile of this rug. But the person who disposed of the doorstop was the person who disposed of the carcass of gentle little Jito Kagiwa—which is to say, the murderer. No, no, Mr. Gallant, be fair. It wasn't guesswork."

Miss Merrivel said in a ghastly voice, "Mr. Gallant. I can't believe—but why did you do this awful . . ."

"I think I can tell you that," said Ellery. "It was apparent to me, when I saw that his story of the cache in the doorstop was a lie, that he had probably planned to tell that ingenious story from the beginning. Why? One reason might have been to cover up the real motive for the theft of the carved piece—to divert the trail from its use as a mere weight for a dead body to a fabricated use as the receptacle of a fortune, and its theft for that reason. But why the lie about the hundred thousand dollars? Was it because you had embezzled a hundred thousand dollars from your stepfather's business, Mr. Gallant, knew that the discovery of this shortage was imminent, and therefore created a figmentary thief who last night stole the money which you had stolen and dissipated possibly months ago?"

Bill Gallant was silent.

"And so you built up a series of events," murmured Ellery. "You arranged the old gentleman's bedclothes during the night to form a human figure, as if he had done it himself. You threw some of his clothes into one of his suitcases, as if he had planned to flee. In fact, you arranged the whole thing to give the impression that Mr. Kagiwa, whose business I have no doubt is shaky—largely due to your peculations—had cut loose from his Occidental surroundings once and for all and vanished into the mysterious Orient from which he had come . . . with the remnants of his fortune. In this way there would be no body to look for, no murder to suspect; and you yourself would escape the consequences of your original crime of grand larceny. For you knew that, like all honorable and gentle men, your stepfather, who had given you everything, would forgive everything except your crime against honor. Had Mr. Kagiwa discovered your larceny, all would have been lost."

Bill Gallant said nothing; he was still staring out the window where nothing more was to be seen except the quieting water. The rowboat, the stone, the suitcase, the dead body, the men had vanished.

"And the inheritance," muttered

Cooper. "Of course, he was the heir. Clever, clever."

"Stupid," said Ellery gently, "stupid. All crime is stupid."

Gallant said in the same dead voice, "I still think you were guessing about the doorstop being solid," as if he were engaged in a polite difference of opinion.

"No," said Ellery, almost protesting. "Please give the devil his due. It was all obscure to me until on my way out I thought of the fact that the doorstop was made of soapstone. I knew soapstone to be fairly heavy. I knew the piece was almost perfectly regular in shape, and therefore admissible to elementary calculation. It was conceivable that I could test the accuracy of your statement that the doorstop was hollow. And so I came back and asked to consult an almanac. Once I had run across in such a reference book a list of the weights of common minerals. I looked up soapstone. And there it was."

"There what was?" asked Gallant, almost with curiosity.

"The almanac said that one cubic foot of soapstone weighs between 162 and 175 pounds. The doorstop was 6 by 6 by 12 inches, or 432 cubic inches. In other words, ¼ cubic foot. Or, by computing from the almanac's figures and allowing for the small additional weight of the shallow bas-relief dragons, the doorstop should weigh one-quarter of the cubic-foot poundage, which is 44 pounds."

"But that's what the receipt said," muttered Cooper.

"Quite so. But what do those 44 pounds represent? They represent 44 pounds of *solid* soapstone! Mr. Gallant had said the doorstop was *not* solid, had a hollow inside large enough to hold a hundred thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills. That's one thousand bills. Any hollow large enough to contain one thousand bills, no matter how tightly rolled or compressed, would make the total weight of the doorstop considerably *less* than 44 pounds. And so I knew that the doorstop was solid and that Mr. Gallant had lied."

Heavy feet tramped outside. Suddenly the room was full of men. The corpse of Jito Kagiwa was deposited on a divan, naked and yellow as old marble. Bill Gallant was still frozen, and they saw that his eyes, too, were dead as they regarded the corpse . . . as if for the first time the enormity of what he had done had struck home.

Ellery took the heavy doorstop, glistening from the sea, from the hand of a policeman and turned it over in his hands. And he looked up at the wall and smiled in friendly fashion at the dragon, which was now obviously a pretty thing of silk and golden threads—and nothing more.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RICHARD SNODGRASS**

TITLE: ***How To Deal With It***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALE: Tempe, Arizona

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Mackenzie had hurt his leg in the Pacific, and when peace came he got himself a gas station and tried to forget violence. But there is something, even about violence, that is best never forgotten: how to deal with it.*

AS THOUGH MAKING SURE HE HAD enough change, Ted Mackenzie stood by the register and counted ones until the hardtop convertible drove away from the pumps. When the car left the pattern, he put the bills in the drawer, closed it, then walked to the shoulder of the highway.

Traffic was thin—the four-to-six rush was over—so he didn't have trouble watching the car. It passed Harry Underwood's gas station a block away, then Glenn Fulmer's station a half block beyond Underwood's, and stopped for a red light at College Avenue. The signal changed, and the car made a right turn.

Drying his neck with a handkerchief, Mackenzie watched heat shimmer up from the concrete for a minute, then turned and walked back to the office. From the shelf above his desk he took down a catalogue listing the major California wholesale houses. His fingers ran over the familiar names in the index quickly, thoroughly. The salesman said he represented the Los Angeles Perfect Parts Company: no such company was listed.

Mackenzie picked up the telephone, dialed.

Glenn Fulmer's wife answered.

"Ted Mackenzie, Harriet. Can I speak to Glenn a minute?"

She called out to her husband,

then asked, "How's Lorna and the kids, Ted?"

"Lor and Steve are fine, Harriet. Eileen's still got the colic."

He didn't understand her laughter until she explained, "I'm sorry, Ted. Lord knows we've had our share of colic—but if you saw what's coming down the hall! Can of beer, no shirt and blue suspenders."

They laughed together.

"You get the family over to see us."

"Soon as the baby's well, Harriet."

Glenn Fulmer asked, "What's wrong with blue suspenders, son?"

"Hi, Glenn. Say, did a salesman named Poletti drop in today? Arnold Poletti. Not too old, neat, dark complexion. Drives a green and white hardtop."

"Nope."

"I didn't think so. Ever hear of the Los Angeles Perfect Parts Company? Wholesalers."

There was a pause. "Not right off, Mac. I'd have to check my lists for sure."

"What about Frost Air refrigeration units?"

"Don't recall the name."

"Poletti was here a few minutes ago," Mackenzie said. "He claims he's been in Phoenix the last three days, only started on Tempe late this afternoon with the deal. It's some kind of exclusive franchise."

"What's he asking?"

"One-forty on a six-unit order."

"Dogs!" Fulmer exploded. "Hell, Mac, even the big ones can't wholesale for that. Cash or consignment?"

"He didn't say."

"No identification papers?"

"He didn't show any," Mackenzie said. "That, his attitude, the car he's driving is why I called."

"High pressure, eh?"

"That's just it, Glenn. He's a very calm, soft-spoken guy—too much, for my dough. One of my regular salesmen had a deal like this, he'd do cartwheels from here to Mesa. And tell me something. If you were selling refrigeration, what would be under your hood?"

"No demonstrator?"

"He's in a Hertz rental. Bought five gallons of regular and paid cash."

Fulmer grew more incredulous when he heard about Mackenzie watching Poletti drive by the other two stations.

"How long's he going to be around?" Fulmer asked.

"Tuesday. He'll be out again tomorrow."

"Get them Phoenix Better Business people onto him. They're open Saturdays."

"I planned to."

"I'll get a hold of Underwood. We'll pass it to the other boys around town."

"Fine," Mackenzie said, hearing the other take a swallow of beer.

"Not to change the subject, son, but I wonder is the new supermar-

ket hurting you like it does me?"

Mackenzie smiled. "I've got two storage tanks out there with just about enough gas to fill a motor scooter, if that's what you had in mind."

"Dogs, yes," Fulmer chuckled. "I pumped a hundred more a day all week. You been over to the market?"

"Not yet. Lor and Steve went over a couple of hours ago. I'll make it on Sunday."

"Steve's like them twins of ours," Fulmer said, "he'll be a month getting Lor home."

"Why's that?"

"Taking the twins again tonight. We had to promise—to get them home yesterday. Merry-go-round. Only rode six times."

Both men laughed.

"Take it easy, Mac."

"See you, Glenn," he said, and put down the telephone.

A diesel rolled by, gaining speed from the light at College Avenue, and Mackenzie listened automatically to the exhaust rap, the gears drop in fourth, fifth, sixth . . .

He didn't like it, didn't want anything to do with that salesman. Describing it to Glenn, he realized no link existed between a man like Poletti and any confidence game he'd ever heard of. Maybe the old intuition was working—the nearly forgotten habit of the islands—judging men by what they did not say . . .

He wiped his hands, got the credit card vouchers from the safe, made sure they were in order, and began writing the serial numbers on a receipt pad for tomorrow's gas drop. Half the vouchers were recorded when two shorts and a long sounded from the edge of the pattern. Lorna Mackenzie braked the pickup to a stop outside the office door and a bright, wide eye appeared above the window ledge.

"BLAM!"

Mackenzie slumped, clutching his shoulder.

"Indians don't stop *this* stage!" Steve yelled.

"Mustard face."

"Two free hot dogs, dad. On sticks!"

"Naw."

"I'll betya. Weren't they, mom?"

Lorna smiled across the bouncing head, dabbing her neck with a handkerchief. "Also two pieces of cake. Rode the merry-go-round how many times?"

"Four," the boy said proudly. He made a V with his fingers. "And two ice creams!"

Lorna said, "Mrs. Waymark must think I've abandoned the baby. We just thought we'd say hi."

"Hi," Mackenzie waved.

Steve looked at his parents curiously, then he also waved. "Hi!"

All three laughed.

She put the truck in gear. "Is something wrong, Ted?"

"I'm hungry, Mrs. Mackenzie." It was too abrupt. So he laughed, roughing Steve's hair. "Too many

doggone grease jobs today, Lor."

She looked at him for an instant, then smiled. "How about a dollar eighteen chicken after work? Grand opening special at the supermarket—today only." Her eyebrows arched. "I splurged terribly."

"On your horse," he said, "before I shut down early."

Steve bounced on the seat. "On your horse! On your horse!"

She started forward, then stopped, leaned out the window and pointed to the cluster of floodlights on the east side.

"Forget the floods, Mackenzie?"

And pulled away.

One hour and twenty-five minutes later, at 8:12 P.M., Mackenzie went to the switchbox and turned off the floodlights, pumps, office lights, compressor. It was a good feeling, relaxing, as though he were shutting down the tense circuits in his own arms and legs. Poletti was still on his mind, but so was getting out of his dirty clothes, a shower, and at least four pieces of chicken.

He slid the gate across the front of the grease room, padlocked it, dropped the air and water hoses in the slots, locked them, checked the pump locks. The last thing was reading the pumps: one hundred eighty-three and one hundred forty —he whistled softly.

Eileen gets over the colic, he thought, reaching for his cigarettes, we'll take off a couple of weeks in August. Flagstaff, maybe. Or Big Lake. Any place you can sleep under blankets and there's swimming for Steve.

It was fifty feet to the row of tall, thick oleanders which separated the house and station. He pushed through the overgrown opening, crossed the yard, and was going up the porch steps when he noticed the hardtop convertible in the driveway. For an instant his mind stopped, wouldn't turn—like an engine without compression. Then he saw that all the living-room shades were pulled down.

When he reached for the knob, the door opened, and Lorna's eyes chilled him with their terror—a terror he hadn't known since the sweltering, silent patrols of the Pacific Islands.

He asked quietly, "What's he want?"

"Five hours of your time," Arnold Poletti said.

In the easy chair next to the bookcase, legs crossed, arms flat on the rests, Poletti was very relaxed—a calm statue. He had changed from the tan suit to a dark blue sports shirt, dark brown slacks, brown crepe-sole shoes. There was a dark blue gabardine jacket on his lap. He looked like a friend stopping by for a minute—if you took away the gun and didn't see the merciless eyes.

Mackenzie started for him, moving cautiously. "Five hours of my—"

The gun pivoted to Lorna. "Help your wife to the sofa. She doesn't

look too good," Poletti said softly.

Mackenzie stopped.

"Now."

Poletti's voice remained soft, but there was an inflection Mackenzie remembered twice in the Pacific. He guided Lorna to the sofa and they sat facing the man.

"Much better, much better," Poletti said. "All right, Jean."

A woman stepped from the hallway which led to the bedrooms. Mackenzie recognized her, remembered talking to her yesterday about renting the pickup. He had been uncomfortable with her—the toreador pants and white sweater were too tight, her hair too blonde, the Mexican purse too large. One thing about her was different now: she held a gun in her hand, at her side.

Poletti hadn't taken his eyes from Mackenzie. "Give her the keys to the pickup."

"They're in it."

"Wipe off the prints in the hardtop," he said, looking at Mackenzie. "And don't forget the ashtray."

"I wasn't planning to, darling." She fingered the purse strap nervously. "Put it in the garage?"

"No, dearest. We'll drop back in a week or so."

The front door slammed behind her.

Poletti laughed softly.

"Where are they?" Mackenzie asked Lorna.

She was close to tears, shaking her head in quick movements.

"The baby's sleeping," Poletti said. "Jean helped your wife get the boy to bed a few minutes ago."

Mackenzie felt himself beginning to relax, beginning to think clearly again.

Lorna grabbed his hand. "I—he said you'd made an appointment with him—a sales meeting. You and Glenn. Harry Underwood. And some of the others. Demonstration or something—I don't remember. He'd talked to you earlier, he said, so I let them in and he—"

"So you know why I stopped by, Mackenzie." There was impatience in the quiet voice. "But I didn't have to because you don't worry her with business. She's been answering questions since she let us in. Now it's your turn. Do you expect company tonight?"

Mackenzie turned to Lorna, but Poletti waved his hand. "Never mind, never mind."

"Not that I know of," Mackenzie said.

"Your wife said no. Definitely no. Which is it?"

"Somebody might drop in. They have before."

Poletti glanced at his watch. "What time do you open in the morning?"

"Seven."

"Ever missed?"

"What?"

"Not opened. Been sick and stayed closed."

Mackenzie shook his head slowly. "Then my wife opens."

"Operates it?"

"She has two or three times."

"Three," Poletti smiled. "When your leg acts up. And hires Mrs. Waymark to baby-sit so you can let it rest."

"Yes." Lying was out, he told himself—don't even try it that way.

Poletti recrossed his legs. "The phone, Mrs. Mackenzie."

She didn't move, and Mackenzie felt her thigh trembling against his.

The gun motioned.

"It's all right, Lor honey."

She nodded stiffly and went to the telephone.

"Call the Waymark woman," Poletti said. "Tell her to come at six thirty in the morning. Tell her you're sorry you didn't make arrangements when she was here this afternoon, but this just came up. Your husband's going to Tucson on business."

Lorna made the call in a normal voice. When it was over, she put down the phone and stood with her back to them, one hand against the wall, the other pressed hard against her cheek.

Outside, the hardtop backed out of the driveway. A door slammed. Then the door of the pickup opened and closed, the engine raced, and the truck threw gravel backing out.

"She doesn't wreck it," Poletti said. "What kind of shape's the pickup in?"

"Good."

"How good?"

"Wha—? I don't get you?"

"Ever have trouble with it? At high speeds."

Mackenzie hesitated a second. "I'd say never go over sixty, Mr. Pol—"

The man lunged to his feet, his jacket slipping to the floor, the gun pointed at Lorna's back. "Cut it. cripple!" He glanced at his watch. "Me and you shove off in—" The sharp intake of Lorna's breath stopped him. "That's right, sweetie, and nothing happens if I get information instead of smart talk. The truck?"

"Eighty." Mackenzie spoke slowly. "Ninety at the outside—Mr. Poletti."

The man moved back to the chair and sat down. His left hand clenched, unclenched, like a heart. "Know all the cops in this town, if you're stopped?"

"Most of them."

"She said you knew them all."

"They put on two new boys a couple weeks ago, Mr. Poletti."

"And you don't know them. To wave hello?"

"I know them that well, Mr. Po—"

"I'm warning you, cripple," Poletti said softly, recrossing his legs. "Press too hard, somebody gets hurt. Do the cops know your face? Yes or no."

"Yes."

"You're sure."

"Yes."

"Do they know your truck?"

"Yes."

They listened to the car wheel back in the driveway and skid to a stop inside the garage.

"Damn her," Poletti muttered. He threw a paper across the room at Mackenzie's feet. "Study it. And you—" He motioned Lorna back to the sofa.

Mackenzie unfolded the paper slowly, deliberately. The lines, a street route across Tempe, were neat and straight, but the handwriting—street names, directions, stop signs—was a childish scrawl. For several seconds he didn't know what the big square on East 5th Street represented; when it came to him, he looked at Poletti.

"You're crazy."

Poletti threw his head back and laughed. Forget the source and it was a warm laugh.

Mackenzie waited.

"Well," Poletti said.

"The new supermarket?"

"That's right. You aren't dumb, gimp. Jean stays with your wife and kids, you drive the pickup—to where?"

"Forest Avenue. A half block south of the market."

"Next to the alley."

"Yes."

"We get there," Poletti said, "turn off the lights and engine. I'll be six minutes, give or take thirty seconds. You'll hear the merry-go-round. Start the engine then, but no lights. You'll hear me get in back of the truck. I'll pull that canvas over myself, rap on the cab, and you drive through the alley to College Avenue. At College you turn on the lights."

Mackenzie wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "Now who's dumb? Don't you think they'll follow you, see you get in the—"

"With the store dark, these clothes, and the merry-go-round, blaring, they won't know what's up. We don't tell them with lights or exhaust. Remember that. Don't race the engine."

"There's heavy traffic on the campus at nine."

"I know," Poletti smiled. "I've been watching for three days. And you better remember something else: Jean's driven me over the route six times blindfolded. What happens at Apache Highway?"

"I make a left," Mackenzie said, "go past Fulmer's—" He stopped, remembering Glenn and the twins.

Poletti leaned forward slightly.

"Go past Fulmer's," Mackenzie repeated, "and—"

"Don't get ideas, cripple."

"No ideas, Mr. Poletti."

The man leaned back slowly. "Don't forget your kids."

"Past Fulmer's and Underwood's to McAllister Avenue, make a right, go to East 14th, make a left, go past the fraternity houses to Sunset Drive. I come up Sunset to this house."

The hand clenched, unclenched. "Back in the drive the way you always do."

"You've been watching us three days?"

Poletti smiled. "Off and on."

"And the supermarket?"

"I know more than the clerks, Mackenzie." A very proud little boy, boasting. "They conducted tours all week to *inform* the public of their new, modern, high-speed facil—" He was on his feet, but it was only the noise of the garage door rolling down. "Take care of that," he said to himself, glancing at the watch.

The woman came in carrying an ivory-colored overnight bag.

"Why didn't you fire the gun, stupid?" Poletti said. "The sack, the sack."

"I know, I know," she mimicked, slamming the bag down on the television set. She snapped it open, took out a folded grocery sack, went over and picked up the jacket, held it for him.

His eyes didn't leave Mackenzie as he shifted the gun from his left to his right hand, and back again. He tucked the sack down inside his shirt. "Get the map," he said. "Where's your gun?"

"Where do you suppose," she asked, walking to Mackenzie. "I left it in Denv—"

"Shut up!"

"All I—"

"Shut up!" He looked at Mackenzie closely, motioning to her. "Stay with the boy."

"What about her? She's about to flip."

"Stay with the kid with the gun out. She stays out here unless she wants him hurt. We'll be back five to seven minutes after nine."

"If you aren't, I do like you said?"

"No," Poletti grimaced. "You call the Bureau of Missing Persons."

"Clever boy," she said, leaving the room.

"Got the picture, Mr. and Mrs. Mackenzie? Perfectly clear?"

Mackenzie stood up. "You know more than the clerks, Poletti, so you read the ads. Fifty clerks. Twenty-five regularly, but fifty to serve the grand opening rush."

Poletti grinned, holding up one finger. "But only one manager, gimp." Then to Lorna. "Stay there until we're back."

She grasped Mackenzie's hand, looking up at him. "Eileen's bottle."

"What?" Poletti demanded.

She turned on him. "The baby gets a bottle at nine."

"Not tonight."

"She'll cry. She'll cry terribly."

"Good for her lungs."

Lorna stood up, walked over and faced him; she didn't seem aware of the gun. "I hope they kill you."

"Shut up!" His mouth twitched. "Sofa."

She didn't move and each word came with soft clarity. "I pray the bullets hit you in that evil, vile—"

He raised the gun to strike her and she went for his face, her unpainted nails like claws; his left arm came up viciously, catching her

shoulder and chin, knocking her down. Mackenzie moved fast, but the gun pivoted even faster.

"Warn you!" the man's eyes were animal.

Mackenzie turned and helped her up, smoothing her hair gently. She began to tremble violently, and he held her close, running his hands along her arms, her back. As though comforting her, he buried his face in her hair. The faint, familiar perfume held him, made him doubt the plan that was in his mind. His lips moved against her ear.

"Eileen's next bottle," he whispered, "no colic medicine. Next bottle, no med—"

"Can it! We're rolling."

There was nothing in her eyes to tell him she had heard.

"Now," Poletti said, the inflection stronger than before.

The robbery and escape were flawless, had the quiet precision of a new automobile engine. It wasn't until he and Poletti had left the truck—backed in the drive as Poletti ordered, screened from the highway by oleanders— and were going up the porch steps that the first police siren moaned across town.

Poletti's laugh was arrogant.

"I like hick cops, Mackenzie. I really like hick cops."

When the door opened, Lorna Mackenzie got up and started back to the kitchen.

"Sit down," Poletti ordered.

She ignored him, leaving the room.

"Let her go," Jean said from the easy chair. "For God's sake let her feed the brat."

"I told you to stay—"

"I know, mastermind. Just listen a second."

It was two seconds: Eileen's wail would have made an air raid horn envious.

"What about the boy?"

"Sleep," she said above the crying, moving the gun nervously. "All through *that*. Except once. *I* had to get *him* a drink of water."

He motioned Mackenzie to the sofa.

"Let's get out," she said.

"Smoke a cigarette."

Mackenzie smiled, not because the idea had worked, but at his own stupidity. He should have guessed the reaction. Big man, proud, self-important. Did it. Me. Arnold Poletti. Even if Lor didn't give Eileen the medicine, her crying wouldn't touch him. The woman, sure, every time; but not a Poletti.

Abruptly the crying stopped; he could almost hear the famished drinking of his daughter.

"Midnight?" he asked Poletti, who had started transferring money from the grocery sack to the overnight bag.

"That's right, Mackenzie. Crying or no crying."

"You mean, after the roadblocks break up?"

Poletti laughed softly. "You know, gimp, you're pretty bright. Real bright." He looked at him. "Even figured the baby crying, didn't you?"

Mackenzie waited, his heart skipping a beat.

"Not talking? Figuring then." The man evened up a thick pile of bills and they sounded like a deck of cards on the television cabinet. "Baby, here's one guy never stops figuring."

"Don't start talking," she said, and dragged on the cigarette.

"At it every second since he saw me in his chair. You're in *his* chair, baby. That hurt you, Mackenzie, us sitting in your favorite chair?"

Mackenzie said nothing. He looked directly at the smug, dark face.

"First thing, he started for me. Going to get me. That's hot. With a leg like that, he's going to get me. That a war leg, Mackenzie? Tell me a war story sometime, will you? Then he answers questions real cute. Expect company, I ask him. A nice, easy question. Somebody *might* drop in, he gives me. Worry Poletti, the cripple figures. Make him nervous. Never drive the truck over sixty, Mr. Poletti. Mr. Poletti this, Mr. Poletti that, fifty clerks, lot of traffic on the campus. And did you notice his eyes when you slipped about Denver, Jean? A real figurer, all right. When we parked on Forest, Jean, he's still figuring. All the chances I give him, baby, and the cripple is still figuring."

She jammed out the cigarette. "Cut it!"

He seemed to forget the money. "There's this house across the street and we see the outline of a dame watching television. I'll go over and call the cops when Poletti's inside, he's figuring. That's what I'll do —its written all over his dumb face. So I reminded him, baby: Jean takes your boy if we don't get back by seven after nine." He laughed.

She lit another cigarette.

"But it stopped him—cold. So now what's he doing. Relaxing, taking it easy? No. He's sitting there wondering why so long between the job and the siren and how after we leave they'll trace us by the hardtop and how to tip some john at a roadblock." He started on the money again. "You must have a headache by now, Mackenzie."

"They'll find your car in my garage. It's rented—it can be traced—"

Poletti looked at the woman. "See, baby. See?"

"And you're wrong about me tipping off the police," Mackenzie went on. "All I want is your stink out of this house."

The man's smile disappeared. "You've been careful up to now. Don't lose your head."

Silence, except for the deck-of-cards sound of the money. The last handful he made into a roll and shoved it into his pocket. He smoothed and folded the sack, put it in the overnight bag, closed it.

Then he turned like an actor on a stage. "Like you said, gimp. Midnight."

Two minutes later Eileen began crying again and three minutes after that the telephone rang.

Poletti moved toward the phone. "Who is it?"

"There's an intelligent question," Mackenzie said, and he saw the woman smile.

"You smart—"

It rang again; Eileen cried out.

"Cover us, Jean." He drew the gun from his belt. "Who and what do they want—that's all, Mackenzie. I warn you."

Mackenzie went to the phone, picked it up; his hands were moist, trembling slightly.

"Hello."

"Son," Glenn Fulmer roared, "we had us one tonight!"

"What's that, Glenn?"

"Supermarket got held up!"

"No."

"We was there. Manager was clobbered—looks like he'll die."

Mackenzie wet his lips; the gun nudged his spine.

"What happened, Glenn?"

"They don't know it all—manager never came to. They found a broken package of cookies on the desk and think that's how the man got him to unlock the office. Safe was open or he made him open it, they don't know which. Then he beat him up something terrible. One eye's gone, fractured skull, maybe broke his neck."

Mackenzie held the phone with both hands.

"No call for it either," Fulmer went on. "Slick job, I tell you. Turned off all the power but the merry-go-round. They think it was the bandit himself yelled fire. Kids screaming, people running all ways —regular panic. Didn't anybody know anything for five minutes."

Poletti tapped him, motioned to cover the mouthpiece.

"Just a second, Glenn. Lorna's calling."

"They get a description," Poletti whispered.

"Anyone see him, Glenn?"

"Five of us."

The gun jabbed. "Five of you?"

"One couple saw him go through the door that leads up to the office. Another woman thinks it was him she saw go in back—heading for the lights about then, they think. I spoke up after I heard the others."

"Little louder, Glenn. Eileen's crying."

"We saw him going in—Harriet and me. Waiting for the twins on the ride and Harriet said that man must be cold-blooded wearing a jacket on a night like this. I looked and dogs, if the first thing that came in my head wasn't the salesman you told me about."

"Pol—" The gun rammed; Mackenzie clenched his teeth against the pain.

"Crazy, I reckon, but I told the police about that Poletti. So don't leave town, son."

"I—I don't get you, Glenn."

"Said they'd see you about it sometime tonight. I thought I'd better tip you off." Fulmer chuckled. "That's what they're always doing in the television shows."

"Thanks," Mackenzie said, trying to smile. "I'll start packing."

"Take it slow, Mac."

"See you."

After the connection was broken, Poletti stepped back and said, "Let's have it."

Mackenzie told about his earlier call to Glenn, the reasons for it, and all the while he talked he saw the manager's broken face. He saw the face of his baby girl. Lor. Steve. And if Poletti would do that to a man when there was no reason for it, what would it be after they got to Tucson?

He finished. Poletti looked at him, his left hand working slowly.

"Tell his wife," he said to the woman, "to dress the boy."

"What—" Mackenzie wiped his hands on his shirt.

"The boy goes with us."

Mackenzie shook his head slowly.

Poletti smiled. "You don't call it, cripple. I tell you."

"No." The word was finality. "*I* tell *you*. Steve doesn't go."

"Move, Jean. And tell her to shut the brat up before I do it for her—and she won't like my method."

"Stay where you are, Jean." Mackenzie took a step toward Poletti. "Ask yourself one question, Poletti: how far do you get without me? Roadblocks, your rented car in my garage, what Fulmer's told them. Even hick cops can add. Five miles, ten if you're lucky. But I'll make you a deal, mastermind." He made himself smile. "You're a deal man, if I remember right."

Poletti's eyes were blazing.

"The three of us leave now. When the police come—" Mackenzie's voice was steady, "Lor tells them I'm out on a flat job, be back in an hour or so. She isn't sure where—Papago Park, maybe. They probably won't get here for another half hour. That gives us an hour and a half. I'll have you seventy miles by then, in the middle of an Indian reservation. The road's bad, but we can make Tucson in four to five hours." He paused, then said quietly, "Accept it or not, my boy doesn't go."

They faced each other. There was no movement, no expression.

Tracing it, Mackenzie thought, like a mechanic running down a short. Where's the break, the crossed wires? Go ahead. Trace, check, recheck. You won't find it, thank God, until Lor and the kids are safe.

The woman came to Poletti's side.

"Don't you start," he said, not looking at her. Then to Mackenzie. "Deal. But you remember something: I've got two wants on me now, three if the manager flakes. One, four—no difference from here on."

"I'll tell my wife."

Poletti followed him to the kitchen where they found her walking the baby. Eileen was wrapped in a yellow blanket, the one Lor had embroidered with a floppy-eared rabbit.

"I'm going to use the medicine, Ted." The skin around her eyes was dark with fatigue.

"In a second, Lor." He told her what they were going to do, talking slowly, waiting for Eileen's next spell of crying. But only contented sounds came from the blanket.

"Let's go."

He could feel Poletti's suspicion on his back. The baby whimpered and he turned. "You mind if I kiss my wife?"

Poletti smirked. "Be my guest."

He gripped her arms firmly, longingly, the baby between them, crying now, and Lor's fingers came to his cheek, touched the stubble as if it were velvet. He bent down and said softly, into the crying, "We leave, lock front. Out back. I'll stall. Go Waymark's, call police. Hurry."

"Touching as hell."

She had heard each word and her arms tightened around the child.

"You want him back, sweetie, don't get ideas."

Outside, they crossed the lawn to the pickup. Poletti took the overnight bag from the woman and climbed in back. He looked down at them.

"Give me your gun, Jean."

It was a sudden, relieved thrust.

"We hit a block, Mackenzie, she's had car trouble, if they ask. Nothing, if they don't ask." He was breathing harder. "Inside. Wait a minute."

Mackenzie's hand rested on the knob.

"You're Number One, gimp, anyone touches the canvas."

He had trouble opening the door, got in, eased himself across the seat to the wheel. The fragrance of oleander permeated the cab. When the woman slammed the door, he let his foot down on the accelerator, held it. Then it was a problem to find the key—this pocket?—no, those were the station—that pocket, no—Jean pointed to them in the switch. He smiled at her, shaking his head at how stupid he was.

Gasoline mingled faintly with oleander.

Poletti rapped insistently.

He pressed the starter: the engine caught, died, and then the starter growled once, twice, three times. There was movement in back.

Poletti stood at Jean's window. "What's wrong with—" He sniffed, almost yelled, "Unflood it! Give you a minute—just one minute!"

"Quiet, for God's sake."

"One minute, Mackenzie — you hear me? Then I go back for the kid."

He had to push to open his door against the thick oleanders—and

there it was, looking him in the face. Let them be out of the house, he prayed. Then he dived, branches hitting, ripping his face, crashing through, rolling. A bullet exploded dirt three inches from his hip. He dropped his face in the dirt when two cars went by on the highway, then pushed himself up as quickly as he could, damning the game leg, and moved, crouched, ready to flatten, across the open space, hearing Poletti.

"Take this—get her and the kids in the truck. Make it fast!"

The keys were out when he rounded the corner of the building, Poletti behind him, pounding across the open space. His hands shook so he could hardly get the padlock open. He pulled the gate back, stepped in the grease room, pushed the gate, locked it, and dropped in the shadow of a battery display.

Poletti's silhouette, stalking now, crossed the front of the station. He tried the office door, then the padlock on the gate. Four cars and a diesel passed, headlights flaring the grease room, the office, the shelves of accessories and cans of oil, and Mackenzie saw Poletti's eyes probing the two rooms. He pulled himself across the floor with his elbows, the old, forgotten training reviving as evenly and surely as a pneumatic hoist, making it through the door in the partition to the desk.

"You drive like you said, I don't touch the family," Poletti called.

He eased open the lower left-hand drawer, found the gun, slipped the safety.

"Deal?" the silhouette asked, then laughed. The laugh had an odd quality.

Poletti stepped back from the lock, aimed. Mackenzie fired, exploding glass in the partition, shattering plaster and brick near the lock. Poletti dropped behind the four-foot wall that ran the front of the office, and Mackenzie heard him moving back along the wall. He aimed at the upper molding of the big front window, fired. The glass shattered, crashing down in a hundred knives.

He could see where the bullet ripped through the canopy, but he could hear no movement.

"What happens," Poletti laughed, "I hit one of your pumps?" Four feet away, behind the wall.

A distant siren, its intensity growing as it moved on the highway toward them.

"Go ahead," Mackenzie said, then worked himself quickly from the office into the grease room. The face of one pump exploded, then the other. Long as he doesn't hit the meter, he thought, pushing backward toward the switchbox.

The siren and headlights hit the edge of the pattern, brakes grabbing, red lights blinking methodically. Poletti stood up firing; hot water poured steaming from the radiator. Then he ran, firing again, the return fire slamming into the

wall, the office. Cars were stopping on the highway.

Mackenzie shouted, "Police!"

They were out of the car. "Throw the gun!"

"No! It's me, Mackenzie, inside the station. How many of you?"

He heard them muttering.

"How many, damn it?"

"Four, Ted."

"Two of you go in back, another the front. Call when you're set."

He watched them spread away from the car, his fingers trembling on the floodlight switch. Seconds passed. Another siren sounded in the distance.

"Set!" From the front.

"Okay!" From the back.

He heard the switch click, saw the floodlights through the gate, heard the quick footsteps, the shots, and the animal scream. He closed his eyes, his lips quivering; his legs began shaking so violently he grabbed the switchbox to keep his feet.

Twenty minutes later, Lieutenant Alvarez finished the initial questioning, said he would be out again in the morning. The woman hadn't been any trouble, the ambulance was gone, the money and car impounded.

Mackenzie watched the last police car leave the pattern, then found two boards behind the tool bench, nailed them in an X across the front window, turned off the floods, and was locking the gate when Steve came around the corner of the building. The pajamas were almost off his hips.

Mackenzie picked up his son.

"Mom says we're having chicken, if you want."

He squeezed him hard, and they started back to the house.

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TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The former Assistant District Attorney was in a swanky southern resort for a well earned vacation. There he met a beautiful woman who looked disturbingly familiar. When he finally recognized her, Gary McMillan was in for the shock of his life . . .*

IT WASN'T AN ILL WIND, GARY McMillan thought. It couldn't be an ill wind that blew a man out of the November streets up north and the grim routine of the District Attorney's office into a sun-and-sand world of striped umbrellas and little cocktail tables and tawny girls parading in scanty bathing suits. No, not an ill wind at all.

Gary was a tall young man, two years under thirty, with the build and temperament of an athlete; but he felt pale and anemic against this background of bronzed and honey-colored human beings. That was something that could be remedied. Just give a man time!

He took a swift expectant inventory of the people at the little tables as he walked along the terrace. There could be someone he knew. The percentages were not too heavily against it, and he had faith in percentages. He knew an extraordinary number of people and the people whom he knew best were those who could afford southern vacations during the winter. Somebody would be here, in this particular city, in this particular hotel. He felt quite certain of it. Even a professional bore would be welcome as a temporary icebreaker in strange surroundings.

He smiled at his own imagery.

He was so new to all this sunlight and warmth that he was still thinking in terms of breaking the ice. Then he saw the girl.

"I know her," he thought.

She was a picture blonde, somebody out of a magazine illustration or an expensive fashion ad: regular features, cream-and-coffee skin, short softly-curled hair, and in her early twenties. She was wearing a turquoise bathing suit, with a white sweater across her shoulders, and she was sitting at a table with an older couple. No name came with the memory, so Gary hesitated. She looked up and he read startled recognition in her eyes. That was enough—her name could come later. He had been luckier than he had dared to hope.

"I knew that I would meet someone I knew," he said, stopping beside the table. "I had a bet with myself."

"And you won," a cool, little voice said. "How lucky for you!"

She had no difficulty with his name. "Alice, this is Mr. McMillan," she said. "Mrs. Hanlon, Mr. McMillan, and Mr. Hanlon."

The Hanlons were in their late thirties or early forties—a tall light-haired man and a short, dark woman, cheerful people in bathing suits and beach robes. They had the smooth, sun-tinted skins of the initiated and their welcome was a slightly amused awareness of Gary's status.

"Just arrived?" Hanlon said.

"This afternoon."

A watchful waiter took Gary's drink order as they were settling into the polite exploratory conversation of people who have just met. The blonde girl had deep blue eyes. Her name would not emerge from the mists, nor any association that would place her. And she offered no help. She talked in terse generalities, leaving it to Gary to explain himself to the Hanlons if he cared to do so.

"I am a victim of the election," Gary said. "I was assistant to the District Attorney of State City and the voters didn't give him another term."

"How interesting! Your work, I mean." Alice Hanlon said. "And how frustrating to be at the mercy of votes."

Gary shrugged. "We worked for the votes and we missed."

"I am certain the result doesn't reflect either on your zeal or your ability," the blonde girl said.

There was a tone, an undercurrent, in her voice that gave the words a special significance. Gary looked at her and read challenge in her eyes. The fog lifted from his memory, and then he knew who she was.

Her name was Lora Calliday and he had tried her several years ago for murder.

"I consider this a fortunate meeting," Mark Hanlon said. "My wife and I are great admirers of Miss Lane. We are having dinner to-

gether here at the hotel tonight. It would be pleasant to have a friend of hers join us, particularly someone who has proved to be such good company on such short acquaintance."

Gary McMillan was glad that Mark Hanlon was not a man of few words. He had time to recover from the shock and to seek a cue from the girl. She was "Miss Lane" now rather than "Mrs. Calliday"—a blonde who had once been a brunette. He had not the faintest idea why the Hanlons admired her, but he was probably expected to know. She nodded imperceptibly to the question in his eyes.

"I would be delighted to have dinner with you," Gary said, "and with Miss Lane."

The girl smiled. She did not look more than twenty-three or -four and she was quite lovely—neither coldly beautiful nor vapidly pretty, merely lovely. She was, he decided later when he cast back in his memory, at least twenty-seven. But his impression of her appearance did not change: she still looked in her early twenties.

She was wearing green when they met for dinner, a brief creation that emphasized the girl rather than itself—her small breasts, trim waist, slender exclamation-point legs. Gary had only time for a brief exchange with her before they reached their table in the huge dining room.

"Tell me," he said, "I have to know. What do the Hanlons admire you for? What do you do?"

The eyes that flashed upward to his were still deep blue despite the green background. "There was a time when you fancied you knew all about me." She shrugged. "I am an artist of sorts."

"What sorts?"

"People. Portraits in black and white. I could always do it. I was a public stenographer down here when I started sketching prominent guests. It caught on. The Hanlons are public relations experts. Many of their clients prefer my sketches to photographs."

She smiled faintly. "My first name is still Lora."

"And mine is Gary."

"That will seem odd," she said.

The whole situation, of course, was odd—more than odd. They were a cheerful foursome at dinner and first names came easy. The Hanlons made a profession of getting along with people, but under the smooth assurance and the amusing anecdotes they had genuine warmth and friendliness. They liked Lora Lane and she obviously liked them. Gary found himself included in the liking, but he doubted that the liking included the girl. It just wasn't possible.

Under the light table-conversation the current of his memory rose to the surface. Lora had not been bright and sparkling in her former identity; she had been drab, colorless, withdrawn. The features that

now seemed delicately carved and proportioned seemed then merely the appropriate features of a cold mask, a murderer's mask. Gary McMillan had considered her a murderess, with no doubts whatever in his mind.

Her husband was a young Army lieutenant and she had shot him with his own pistol. She had held the gun—the standard test brought out the powder stains on her right hand. She had had a motive. She had just returned from a trip to her home in St. Louis, sooner than she planned, and there were evidences of a drinking party in the apartment and of another woman. It was a reasonable, almost inevitable conclusion that she had become angry and jealous, that she had quarreled with her husband, and that she had shot him in a blind rage.

Her defense was that he was drunk, that she was going to leave him, that he threatened to shoot her if she did not unpack, that she grabbed the gun and struggled with him, that he struck her to make her release her grip, and that the gun was discharged in the struggle. It was a standard defense but the gun wasn't close against him when it was discharged, as it would have been during a struggle. The girl had a bruise high on her cheek which closed her left eye, but she could have received that when a desperately wounded man lashed out at her, struggling to obtain possession of the gun *after* he was shot.

Juries are never scientific, and rarely judicial. This one chose between a wronged wife and a husband who was obviously a heel. The question of her actual guilt or innocence of the shooting did not command their first consideration. They acquitted her.

It was difficult to recapture the reality of all that had happened—difficult in this pleasant atmosphere—but such realities did not rub out . . .

There was a small orchestra and a small dance floor. Gary McMillan asked Lora Lane to dance and they moved out into the choppy current of music. She seemed as light and fragile as the wispy green gown that she wore.

"You are behaving very nicely," she said.

"Is that a compliment to my dancing or to my table manners?"

"Neither." She was silent for a few seconds, letting the music carry her along. "I knew when you approached our table on the terrace that you remembered me vaguely but did not recognize me. I was watching your face when recognition came to you." She laughed softly. "You were shocked."

"Surprised."

"No, shocked!"

Gary shook his head unconvincingly.

"You must be in a very uncomfortable position. You did not, of course, share the opinion of the twelve people who made it possible

for me to be here tonight. Dancing with you, of all things!"

He smiled down at her. "I do not find that uncomfortable."

"No? Then I do. I have a new life. The last thing that I wanted, or needed, was to have someone bring a doubt into it."

This was no longer a smiling matter. "I am not doing that," he protested.

"Yes, you are. You can't help it. My attorney convinced twelve people, but he did not convince you. *I* never had a chance to convince anyone."

Gary, who had not been uncomfortable before, was uncomfortable now. "That is all over," he said. "It doesn't matter any more."

"It does to me. I want you to reopen the case."

He looked down at her, startled. "In your own mind," she said.

"What good would that do?"

"It would be good for me."

"Okay. Say when! Tonight?"

"No. Not tonight." She looked away from him. "I have a small studio apartment here at the hotel. I live here and work here. You can find me if you care to do so."

The music made three frantic jumps and vanished into silence. Gary led the girl back to their table and the conversation was general again — cheerful conversation that plumbed no depths. Mark Hanlon danced the next dance with Lora and Gary danced with Alice Hanlon, who was a good dancer and who did not talk when she danced. When the music stopped, she glanced toward her husband and Lora Lane at the other end of the cleared space.

"A lovely girl, Lora," she said. "Have you known her long?"

"I haven't seen her for years."

"So talented," she said, "and such a surprising mind! She has such cool detachment. She always seems to know exactly what she is doing and what she wants to do."

There was a brief exchange at the table and the two ladies went off together. Mark Hanlon lighted a cigar. "How did you know Lora?" he said. "As an artist or as a girl?"

"I don't know much about her work."

Hanlon chuckled. "I rather suspected that the girl came first. Still, it's difficult to separate them. You find the person in the artist. Sensitive. Observant. Impulsive."

"Impulsive?"

"Certainly. She always moves fast. No dillydallying. She agrees to something immediately or she declines just as quickly. It's the same way with her work. She looks at a person, commits herself to a concept, and goes right to it. She is a camera with imagination and a sense of selection. That's what makes her so damned good."

Gary pondered that. It was startling to hear two such contradictory opinions of the same girl from two people so obviously well mated as the Hanlons. To Alice, Lora was

detached, a careful planner; to Mark, she was impulsive. A woman's verdict on a woman was supposed to be much sounder than a man's, but Gary did not subscribe to that theory. The courtroom had taught him that women were deceived by, and about, other women just as often as were men. The Hanlons were intelligent people. One had to give weight to both their opinions.

Alice and Lora returned to the table, but before the music started, a tall young man joined the party. He looked like a professional athlete —broad-shouldered, deeply tanned, with a certain combative hardness. The Hanlons already knew him and Lora introduced him to Gary before she left the party with him. His name was Bart Overton.

The party did not last long after the departure of Lora. In his own room Gary McMillan paced back and forth, frowning thoughtfully. He felt annoyed and frustrated that he had had so little time with the girl. The brief, casual comments of Mark and Alice Hanlon stuck in his mind because they represented considered judgments. Lora Lane was either cool and calculating—or she was impulsive. One verdict or the other was right—but not both of them.

He had seen Lora Lane under fire, had seen her fighting for her life. He had been her antagonist. He should know what she was like, but he did not know whether he agreed with the man's judgment or the woman's. It could be an important point. It could, he realized, be of greater importance than powder stains or powder marks or technical evidence One reached truth through people more often than through things.

He picked up the hotel magazine and sat with it under a floor lamp. The work of Lora Lane was in it. He looked at a series of portraits of prominent hotel guests. The technique was extraordinary. They looked like artistically retouched photographic studies but, without knowing the people, he was aware of the extra quality, the extra something that no camera possessed. He rose and studied himself in the mirror.

He had had no time for the gym or his customary handball workouts during the weeks of the campaign and he had attended too many dinners and political rallies. He was at least ten pounds overweight, perhaps fifteen. His normal face and features did not suggest the matinee idol. He had a broad face, a nose that was too short and blunt, a pugnacious chin.

"She would leave me my natural homeliness," he said, "but she would remove those extra pounds."

He was imagining the technique of Lora Lane and what she would do with his portrait. The knack which had won a reputation for her was the knack of sensing the defects of which a person was sensi-

tively aware. She would be too wise to change an essential feature, one with which a person had lived a lifetime—such as a long nose or a receding chin, a thin jaw or a face that was too round. Her magic would lie in removing the unnecessary, the unwanted thing.

There was something fascinating inside a girl who looked at people and saw them as they wanted to see themselves.

"I'll get in touch with her tomorrow," he said. "I am going to enjoy talking to her."

But it was not that simple. When he called her in the morning, she was politely regretful. She was busy all day and she had an engagement in the evening. The next day? She couldn't be certain in advance. There were so many inescapable, unpredictable things!

She didn't seem as eager for him to reopen the case as she had pretended, or to talk about her side of it. Gary McMillan swam alone, and he did some push-ups and he lay on the beach and he got a little too much sun in one dose. The next morning he called Lora Lane again. She made a date to swim with him in the late afternoon and he was impatient because the rest of the day was unimportant to him after that, merely a stated number of hours during which he had nothing interesting to do.

Lora was a slim, golden goddess in a white bathing suit. She was delicately, exquisitely made, but she swam easily, effortlessly, perfectly at ease in the water. They sat on a blanket under a striped umbrella when they came out of the water and he was no longer aware of her as someone out of another scene in another year; she was vibrantly alive in this present moment that he shared with her.

"I don't feel like talking about anything important today," she said softly. "Not about my work or your work—or anything. Do you mind?"

He did not mind. "Shoes and ships and sealing wax are fine with me," he said.

They talked about very little, about transitory matters, but Gary was charmed by the girl's voice. There was music in it and she chose her words well. She could not, he thought, command very much money with her portraits, even though she was successful and enjoying a local vogue. Unquestionably, she did better financially than when she was a public stenographer in this same hotel, but the setting belonged either to wealth or to someone like himself who was enjoying a brief, extravagant vacation. The talent of Lora Lane would not support such a setting for her indefinitely, and yet she looked at home in it, comfortable in it, as though she had been born to it.

The thought returned to him when he saw her on the terrace that night with Bart Overton. She did not see him. She seemed absorbed in the other man, as he seemed ab-

sorbed in her. They went well together, Gary admitted reluctantly—the tall, bronzed man and the petite blonde with the honey-colored skin. The sight of them together made him restless, vaguely dissatisfied with all the wealth and glamor surrounding him.

His own turn came twenty-four hours later.

He drove Lora down the beach in a rented car to a hotel even more glamorous than the one at which they stayed. She wore a gold dress and silver slippers and she was in a mood to be amusing. She told short humorous anecdotes about people she had met and she laughed softly at his own favorite stories. They had a drink and dinner and they danced. The music found an echo inside of her and she was perfectly in tune with it; but she followed his lead instinctively, needing no obvious clues, dancing to his pattern without breaking the thread of her personal identity with the music.

They walked together on a long pier that was built to the scale of an ocean liner's deck and they sat in deck chairs that commanded a view of the low-hung moon and the silver-splashed water. She signaled with slender fingers for a cigarette, which he produced and lighted. Then she leaned back with a sigh.

"And now, Gary," she said, "to reopen my case!"

He made a gesture of protest. "Let's skip it. That was all over long ago."

"No. The odds are twelve to one in my favor because twelve people said 'No' when you said 'Yes.' But I'm not satisfied with mere odds, Gary."

"Those odds were all you needed then. You don't need anything now. You are a different person."

"That's where you're wrong. I *am* the same person. From where you stood three years ago, I wasn't a person at all. I was merely a prisoner, somebody on trial, a challenge to your skill as a prosecutor. You were not interested in the *kind* of person I was. You were only interested in guns and powder stains and things like that—you and the police and the alleged detectives!"

She spoke quietly, but there was bitter protest in her voice, a sense of outrage. "Those things, unfortunately, were evidence," Gary said.

"In mystery stories, the good ones, they do it much better. The important thing in a mystery story is character, the kind of people involved, their motivations."

"I don't want to do this," Gary McMillan said. "You are making me. Your own story on the stand supplied the characterization and the motivation. You were a woman afraid of a drunken husband with a gun. Your motive was to defend yourself. You struggled with him for possession of that gun and it was discharged in the struggle. That was your own story."

"And you didn't believe it?"

"No."

"I don't blame you. It wasn't true."

The simple statement hung suspended in the still air, complete in itself, calling for no comment. Lora Lane, who had been Lora Calliday, let it hang there. She was not looking at Gary; she was looking across the water at the moon.

"I was a prisoner, remember, and not a person to anyone. Because I had no money, I had a court-appointed attorney. He was a good attorney, but I represented only a job he had to do. Nothing else! He was engaged in a contest with you and he wanted to win. I tried to tell him the truth but he wouldn't have it. He said he couldn't win with it —couldn't win with the truth!"

"Are you trying to tell me that a reputable attorney suggested you commit perjury?"

"Oh, no! Nothing so crude as that." The girl turned to smile briefly at him, then looked out again across the water. "He merely kept saying that my memory must have been blurred by the shock, that there must have been a struggle. He tried to help me to remember. I wasn't stupid. I wanted to be free. He was the only chance I had. I remembered it all exactly the way he wanted me to remember it."

"What is the true story?"

Gary's voice was gruff. He, too, was looking at the moon now.

"It was a story of two people," the girl said. "I was one of them."

She, as she told it, was always a hero worshipper. In high school she was always secretly in love with star halfbacks, basketball players, boys who were spectacular; but she only attracted the unspectacular types who never interested her more than mildly. Her father died and she and her mother went to live with her married sister and her husband, "which wasn't fair to them." Lora won a scholarship to college, held a number of different jobs, and worked during summer vacations so that she wouldn't have to crowd her sister's household.

"At the end of my sophomore year I met Glen Calliday," she said. "He was a senior, in the ROTC, with a commission in the Army waiting for him when he graduated. To me, an officer in the Army was a hero, a he-man, everything that a very feminine person wanted. Naive, wasn't it?"

"No. Uniforms do that. Some women cherish the delusion that the lads with tattoo marks are also he-men."

"Thank you."

One point in her story was, he thought, certainly true. She was a "very feminine person." She reflected that in the way she wore clothes, or didn't wear them, in her walk, her gestures, her voice, the way in which she surrendered herself to a lead on the dance floor.

"Glen was not a hero," she said dispassionately. "He was a badly

spoiled mama's boy who refused to grow up. He had no self-control. He indulged himself in anything he wanted to do. He would get drunk and then not leave it at that. He had to crawl around, telling me what a low creature he was. If I got impatient with him, he called it 'scolding.' *Scolding!* Does that mean anything to you?"

"I'm afraid it does."

Lora nodded. "Then there were women. He would come home and tell me about them. The first time I was going to leave him—immediately. He sobbed and cried. You can't imagine what a weeping man does to a woman. I felt as if I had eaten something abominable and was going to be very, very sick."

Lora Lane straightened her body and swung her legs over the side of the deck chair so that she was facing Gary McMillan, looking into his face.

"I'll skip the rest of that," she said. "You know now that a man like Glen, drunk or sober, never had the courage to threaten me seriously, that he couldn't frighten anybody, and that it wasn't necessary to struggle with him for anything."

"Okay. So what really happened?"

"There was one woman too many, one woman too cheap. I was leaving him. Definitely. I was all packed. He had been drinking, as usual, but he wasn't drunk. He cried and called himself a dirty dog and pleaded for forgiveness while I finished my checking of drawers for anything I might have forgotten. I had had all of that many times before, so I paid no attention to him. He went and got his gun from the other room. He made a wild melodramatic speech. He did not threaten me. He said that he was going to blow *his* brains out, right there in front of me."

Lora's body was tense and there was strain in her face. Her voice trembled as she paused for a moment. When she spoke again, she had her voice under control.

"There was no struggle," she said. "I merely walked across the room and took the gun away from him—the way you would take a dangerous toy away from a small child. I carried the gun with the muzzle pointing toward the floor. I was going to put it away in the dresser drawer. One of my suitcases was in my way, so I stopped walking. Glen was silent, absolutely silent. It wasn't like him—not at all like him. I turned around and looked at him. I realized then that it wasn't merely a gun that I had taken away from him. It was something else."

She waited and Gary said, "What?"

"He was a man who always did exactly what he wanted to do, always took what he wanted—but he wasn't stupid. He knew there is a price on what we take from life. He bought at a discount. He bought cheaply. He paid for what he took with tears and self-abase-

ment. When I took that gun away from him, without arguing about it or rebuking him, or saying anything at all, I took away his discount card. I was telling him, in effect, that he couldn't pay in cheap coin any more, that this time he was going to pay the full price. He couldn't take that, of course. A spoiled child who is thwarted has to kick and scream or lash out."

Lora looked down at her two small, slim-fingered hands. "I fell in a bathtub once," she said with seeming irrelevance. "When I felt myself falling, I grabbed a towel that was draped over a bar on the towel rack. My reason would have told me that the towel wouldn't save me, that it would slip over the bar, but my reason had no time to tell me. I fell too fast."

Gary was looking into her haunted eyes. He knew what was coming, and she knew that he knew. She nodded her head.

"That is how it was. Glen lashed out. He hit me with his fist and the suitcase was behind me. I gripped the gun tightly as I fell over the suitcase."

There was a tense second, then Gary rose, coming up out of the deep drama that had held him immobile. There was a thread, a tenuous line, that linked his mind to Lora's. She rose when he did and she floated into the arms that reached for her. She was soft and fragrant in his embrace, her lips responding warmly to his own. They stood, locked together for an immeasurable space of time on the scenery-deck of a ship that would never leave port; then she faded out of his embrace as effortlessly as she had floated into it, deft in her swift command of him. She did not find it necessary to speak as they walked back the length of the simulated deck. Gary would have taken her in his arms again when they reached his rented car, but she eluded him.

"Not now, Gary," she said. "I want to give you time to think."

He thought about her and about her story, pacing his room alone, seeing her briefly on the beach the following day, seeing her in the distance with Bart Overton. He thought about her when they had dinner together again, dancing together again, on a night when she said, "I'm tired tonight, Gary. Let's return to the shoes and ships and sealing wax. Let's just talk about talk."

There was very little of his time when he did not think of her. Gary McMillan was mature beyond his twenty-eight years. He faced the fact that he was dangerously close to being in love with Lora Lane, if he had not already crossed the line. He faced the fact, too, that there was nothing simple in that situation for either of them. His career lay in State City where he had established himself—and where Lora had stood trial for murder. A person acquitted of a charge was legally

proved innocent, but people did not always accept that innocence. If a prosecutor married a woman whom he had prosecuted . . . Lora, of course, would be as fully aware of all the complications as he was, but he did not know what she felt or thought. She was fending him off.

The question raised by the Hanlons recurred to him again and again. Was Lora Lane a cool, detached person who thought ahead and planned carefully? Or was she impulsive, obeying her intuitions, certain that people were as she saw them?

Gary McMillan did not know.

She could not be both.

It might be necessary to her, if she was a planner, to convince, beyond all doubt of her innocence, the one man who still considered her guilty after the jury came in. She might have no interest in him other than that. She never mentioned Bart Overton but she was seeing him regularly. If she was calculating by nature, she would know that Overton, if he were serious about her, would have to know about her past ultimately. She might need to rehearse her story and the toughest test of that story would be the man who knew more about her past than Bart Overton would ever know.

"Hell, she isn't like that," Gary McMillan said.

He preferred to believe, as Mark Hanlon believed, that Lora Lane was impulsive. She had met the man who believed her guilty—met him without planning to meet him or expecting to meet him. She had challenged him immediately, impulsively, and when the moment was right she had told him her story. Being that kind of a girl, she would see the difficulties ahead and accept them if she loved a man. She was not a woman for a weak man. She had always sought strength in men. She would expect a strong man to face the difficulties with her.

If she was in love with him, and he asked her to marry him, Gary thought, she would go back with him to the city where she was tried for murder and live there. She would, that is, if she was impulsive and not calculating.

He was restless and eager away from Lora, and under her spell when he was with her. But a doubt persisted. If he did not know enough about her—and he didn't—to decide positively in his own mind the question raised by the Hanlons, then he didn't really know anything about her . . .

One night they attended a water show where the performers worked in a large pool under varicolored lights and the spectators sat at small tables around the rim of the pool. Lora was carrying a large handbag, a woven affair, which she placed on the table. There was a moment of excitement in the pool, with the colored lights criss-crossing crazily.

and Lora's elbow struck the bag. Gary stooped to pick it up from the tile floor and the girl bent swiftly down at the same instant. They both stopped, a study in arrested motion.

The bag lay on its side, it contents partially spilled. Lying half in and half out of the bag was a small revolver.

Lora was the first to recover. "That was clumsy of me," she said.

She stood the bag upright, scooped the spilled objects, and restored the bag to the table. Gary sat in stunned silence. She knew that he had seen the revolver, but she did not mention it. His mind reached desperately for an explanation. A girl might carry a gun if she had to be out at night alone in a dangerous neighborhood. She *might.* But why would she carry one when she was escorted to places that were safe—luxury places where she was surrounded by sane people?

Why would this girl ever want to touch a gun again?

The rest of the evening was strained and uncomfortable. Lora talked little, waiting for Gary's lead, and he was in no mood to lead. They parted politely, like two strangers, and there was the shadow of a smile on the girl's face, a smile to which the man could not respond.

In his own room Gary McMillan paced back and forth for nearly an hour, then he called the desk and started to pack. In the morning when he returned to his room after breakfast, a bellboy brought a note. He turned it over in his hands before he opened it. Among the many things that he did not know about Lora Lane, he did not know her handwriting.

"Dear Gary," he read. "It was cruel perhaps to shock you—but I had to know. You have guessed by now that I knocked the bag over purposely. It was not enough for you to believe my story. You had to believe in me. If you had only asked me about the gun, my dear? You didn't. You sought the answer in your own mind where you couldn't possibly find it, where you could find only suspicion, and you did not say simply, as one does to someone who is trusted, 'Lora, why the gun?'

"So you are probably packing and I won't see you again and I am sorry. You believed in me one night and you were right. You doubted me one night and you were wrong. I wonder which night you will remember longest?

"Goodbye, Gary. You were nice to know.

Lora."

Gary McMillan read the note a second time, then a third, before he crumpled it in his hand. It was easy to answer her question. He would remember longest the night

she had won belief from him. He would have to try very hard not to remember it.

He crossed to the phone and asked the bell captain to send up a boy for his bags.

In the same note that Lora asked a question, she had answered one—the big one. An impulsive woman would not have planned such a test for a man. Lora Lane thought and planned and calculated. A woman who did that could tell twelve people a story that convinced *them*, and tell one man a different version that convinced *him*.

He tore the note into strips and set fire to them in a big ashtray. He was not impulsive himself—not in the least.

NEXT MONTH . . .

Another All-Star Issue

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

HUGH PENTECOST's	*The Unpunishable Murder*
DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS's	*Meeting at the Crossroad*
BRETT HALLIDAY's	*Second Honeymoon*
FRANCES & RICHARD LOCKRIDGE's	*Hit-and-Run*
PAUL GALLICO's	*Hurry, Hurry, Hurry!*
LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN's	*A Case of Poetic Justice*
MARK VAN DOREN's	*Man in Hiding*

ALLINGHAM, MARGERY: The Neatest Trick of the Month ..... March 48
The Perfect Butler ..... May 100
ASHBAUGH, DICK: Killer in the Lilacs ..... Feb. 59
AUSTIN, A.: Age Cannot Wither May 50
BARRETT, WILLIAM E.: The Lady, or the Murderer? ..... June 116
BENNETT, KEM: The Flight of the Bumblebee ..... Jan. 5
BERRY, DON: You Got To Play It Smart ..... March 112
BIGGLE, JR., LLOYD: A Case of Heredity ..... June 48
BLOCH, ROBERT: Show Biz ..... May 28
The Living Bracelet ..... June 33
BLOCHMAN, LAWRENCE G.: Murder in a Motel ..... April 5
BOUCHER, ANTHONY: Best Mysteries of the Month ..... Jan.-June
BOYLAN, E.D.: The Methodical Man April 110
BREAN, HERBERT: Then They Come Running ..... May 105
BROWN, WENZELL: Midnight Call March 58
CANNING, V.: Death in France .. March 95
CHESSMAN, RUTH: The Harrington Farthing ..... April 78
CHESTERTON, G. K.: The Man in the Passage ..... Feb. 79
CHRISTIE, AGATHA: The Sign in the Sky ..... Jan. 69
The Blue Geranium ..... March 124
Jealousy Is the Devil ..... May 33
The Dressmaker's Doll ..... June 5
COLLIER, JOHN: Anniversary Gift April 50
COX, LEE SHERIDAN: The Male Io Glasses ..... March 98
DAVIDSON, AVRAM: The Dive People ..... Feb. 45
DAVIS, DOROTHY SALISBURY: Mrs. Norris Visits the Library .... April 70
DE LA TORRE, LILLIAN: The Banquo Trap ..... June 56
FAY, WILLIAM: Just Because You're Human ..... June 35
GARDNER, ERLE STANLEY: The Case of the Scattered Rubies March 22
GIBBONS, ROSEMARY: The Long Black Shadow ..... Feb. 75
GORDON, RICHARD M.: The Murder of George Washington April 48
HARTE, BRET: A Sleeping-Car Experience ..... April 62
KELLY, J. J.: A Scrap of Paper .... June 74
KERSH, GERALD: Karmesin and the Crown Jewels ..... Feb. 36
KING, RUFUS: The Tigress of the Chateau Plage ..... March 136
A Little Cloud . . . Like a Man's Hand ..... May 17
LEWIS, A. H.: Man From Red Dog Feb. 53
LONDON, JACK: The Death Trail Jan. 47
LUPIEN, W.: Instant of Truth .... Feb. 68
MCCLOY, HELEN: The Outer Darkness ..... April 20
MATHESON, RICHARD: What Was in the Box? ..... April 43
MATHIESON, THEODORE: Leonardo da Vinci, Detective ..... Jan. 22
Daniel Defoe, Detective ..... March 64
MAUGHAM, W. SOMERSET: A Point of Law ..... Feb. 24
MONTGOMERY, MARY: Happy Birthday ..... Jan. 34
MOSELEY, J.E.: Louder Than Words Feb. 73
NEBEL, F.: The Fifth Question .. Jan. 116
NIELSON, HELEN: Won't Somebody Help Me? ..... Jan. 121
PALMER, STUART with RICE, CRAIG: Withers and Malone, Brain-Stormers ..... Feb. 5
PENTECOST, HUGH: Know Your People ..... April 123
Trail of the Crescent Moons .... May 5
PEVEHOUSE, ALVIN: The Bay of the Dead ..... Jan. 97
QUEEN, ELLERY: Long Shot ..... March 75
The Hollow Dragon ..... June 81
REISBERSON, WALT: A Case for Thorne Weldon ..... May 59
RICE, CRAIG: The Man Who Swallowed a Horse ..... Jan. 95
Wry Highball ..... March 147
RICE, CRAIG with PALMER, STUART: see PALMER, STUART Feb. 5
SLESAR, H.: Not the Running Type Jan. 64
SNODGRASS, RICHARD: How To Deal With It ..... June 99
STARRETT, VINCENT: The Tragedy of Papa Ponsard ..... Jan. 83
STEINBECK, JOHN: How Mr. Hogan Robbed a Bank ..... March 155
STILL, SIMON: Kelman's Eyes .. April 114
SUTER, JOHN F.: Doctor's Orders May 86
WALSH, THOMAS: The Second Chance ..... Jan. 11
Once Over, Not Too Lightly June 20
WALTON BRYCE: The Greatest Monster of Them All ..... May 88
WOOLRICH, CORNELL: The Inside Story ..... Feb. 94
Blonde Beauty Slain ..... March 5

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